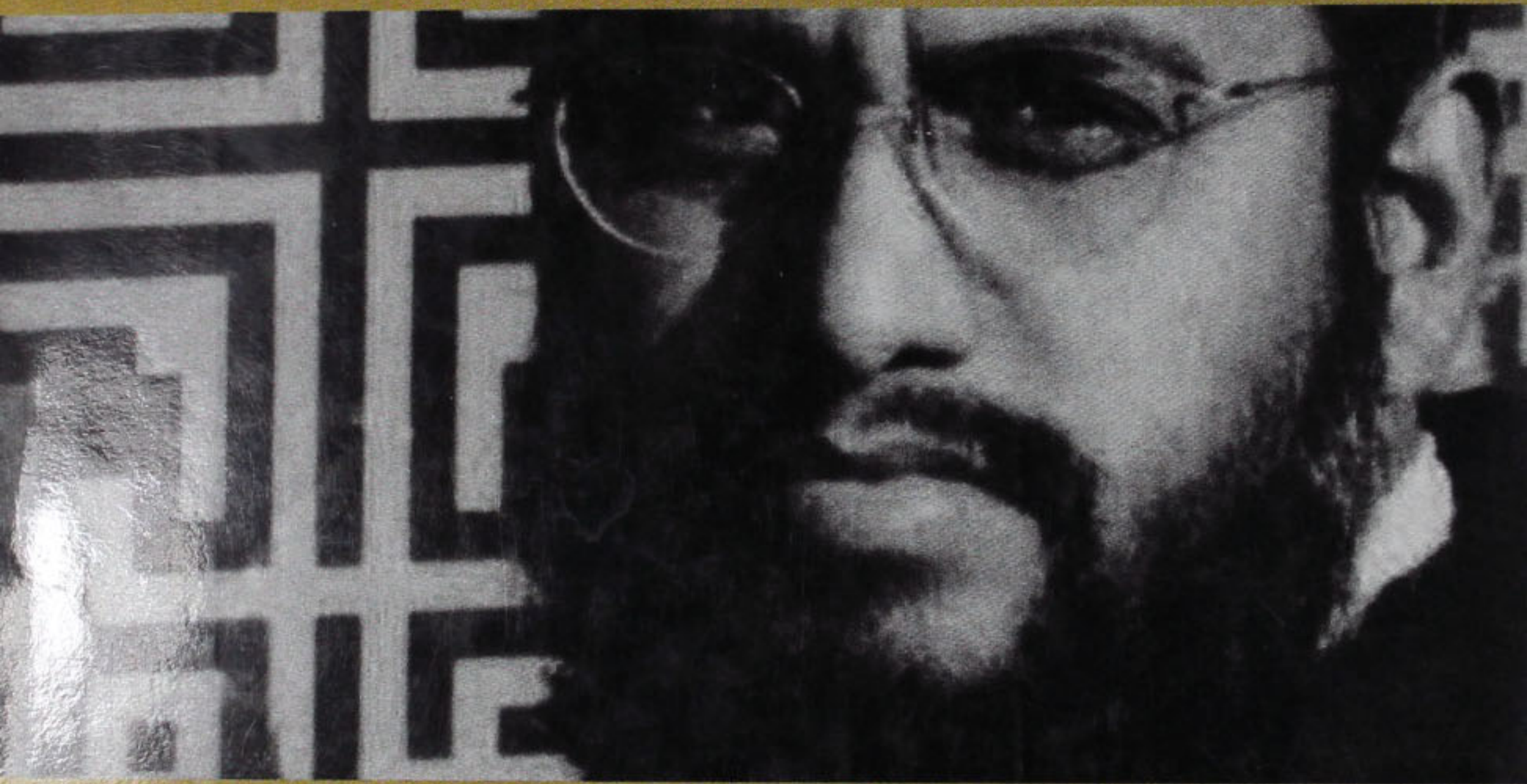


a post-9/11 book on Islam

# Islam

Negotiating the Future



**RASHID SHAZ**

*Islam: Negotiating the Future*



# ISLAM

NEGOTIATING THE FUTURE

RASHID SHAZ

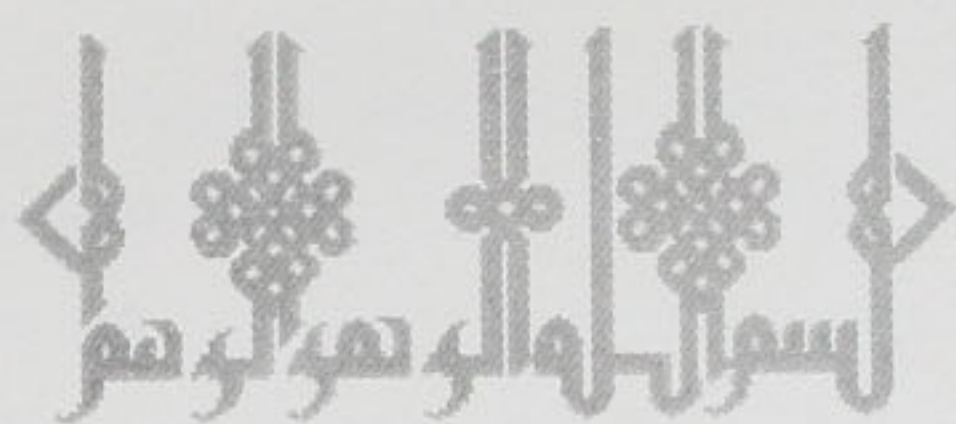
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# Preface

This is a post-9/11 book on Islam. Contrary to the common perception, 9/11 has opened up a whole new world of opportunity for us. Muslims the world over have started questioning themselves why despite being the upholders of the Last Revelation, for so long, they have been living on the margins of history? Creative nations always turn their crisis hours into opportune moments. This book intends just to set the ball rolling in the right direction.

For centuries we Muslims have been accustomed to virtually living in the past. No doubt our past has been bright but now it has a deadening affect on us. Desperate to regain the lost glory of the bygone days, we often end up with the romanticization of the past. For many amongst us, the past has become the only abode of refuge.

In the pages that follow I have purposely tried to demolish that conventional abode; the romantic appeal of the past or fashioning it as an age of no challenge. We must face the stark realities not only of the present but also of the past. This alone can help us in learning from the past mistakes. What constitutes pure Islam are

the Book of God and the proven Sunnah of the prophet. The rest is a blend of message and history. Seeking solace in historical Islam has always been and will remain problematic.

A return to pure Islam demands from us that we roll back the human interpretative material and the intellectual garbage that we have accumulated during our centuries long journey. But this is no easy task. In the past, many of our great luminaries who devoted their entire lives to the Qur'anic studies and even left behind them volumes of Qur'anic exegesis failed to have a direct access to the Qur'an or make their own reading of the text. Had they been successful there was no point in relying solely on the great *fuqaha* of the past or unashamedly claiming to be a Hanfite or a Shafeite. Knowing well that the religion of Islam was perfected during the Prophet's time and that the four or five great masters of *fiqh* were not God-ordained, nonetheless, we look at them as *the* founding pillars of Islam. We often fail to realize that these great *fuqaha* of the past, despite their erudition and piety, were essentially humans who in their reading of the text might have made mistakes. Shedding the intellectual burden of the past centuries, then, is the only viable methodology to have a fresh guidance for our time.

The emergence of divergent *fiqhi* identities amongst us has brought us to a total ruin. Today, it is possible for us to pull down the most tyrant regimes or dismantle mighty empires. But once it comes to creating an alternative system it becomes increasingly difficult for us to decide which school of Islamic thought should prevail. This internal strife has been the root cause of our malaise which needs to be addressed with urgency and care.

﴿ أَمْ حَسِبْتُمْ أَنْ تَدْخُلُوا الْجَنَّةَ وَلَمَّا يَأْتِكُمْ مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ خَلَوْا مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ مَسَّتْهُمُ  
الْبَاسَاءُ وَالضَّرَآءُ وَزُلْزِلُوا حَتَّى يَقُولَ الرَّسُولُ وَالَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا مَعَهُ مَتَى نَصْرُ اللَّهِ  
أَلَا إِنَّ نَصْرَ اللَّهِ قَرِيبٌ ﴾ (البقرة: 214)

as implying that the world is a testing ground for the Muslims where they should be ready to be inflicted with sorrows and sufferings. The infidels will have a field day here. As the Muslims have been promised a glorious life in the Hereafter, they should exercise patience and perseverance while facing afflictions in this world. Some groups, finding no way out of this humiliating situation, have advocated renunciation of the world as a valid religious stance in Islam. But the problem is – renunciation is not really possible while living in this world of here and now. When our very existence is facing slow extinction, how many of us, and for how long, can give up reflecting on it and remain indifferent to the imminent crisis? Further, this humiliating life and the anguish of constant failures are not consistent with our past history when the Muslims of yore led exemplary lives of piety and glory. We want to adopt them as role models in our practical lives. Who could be a greater Muslim than the Prophet himself and his immediate followers? They certainly faced grave challenges, but they did not have to live a life of humiliation and suffer the anguish of constant defeats. Our history tells us that for the believers, leadership has been promised in this world too, not to speak of the Hereafter which is perfectly secure for them. The pages of the Qur'an are witness to the fact that, in every age, the believers have been blessed with the leadership of the world, along with good tidings for the Hereafter. The accounts of the glorious kingdoms of David and Solomon, and the stories about the privileged status of the Israelites among all the communities in the world, underline the fact that once we belong to God's party, we can triumph over the whole world. This had happened before,

and the Qur'an brought good tidings for it. Then, what could be the reason that, in the passage of several centuries, on all critical occasions, the good tidings carried by -- *إِنْ نَصَرَ اللَّهُ قَرِيبَ* -- did not come into effect. Deprived of Allah's help, all our efforts lead only to just one more instance of salutary lesson for the future.

During the era of our continuing decline, a poet was born among us who registered a thousand complaints against God for having withdrawn His favours. There is no doubt that his poetic complaint contained the stark truth of everyday life:

*Your blessings are showered on homes of unbelievers, strangers all  
Only on the poor Muslims, your wrath like lightning falls*

However, to remedy the situation, the poet looked for answers that were as conventional as those presented by our scholars and Predecessors in different forms. A new awakening, seeking Allah's benevolence, turning towards Allah – who can doubt about the validity of such stances? However, despite the presence of such clear answers, if our community has failed to draw help from Allah, the basic reason for this is the fact that we have become accustomed to interpret 'turning towards Allah' merely as mechanical observance of some rituals. This is why all our efforts at turning towards Him could not make us deserving of His help. The Qur'anic promise of help remains ever distant from us. Then naturally the question raises its head in the minds of the restless souls as to whether God exists or does not. Where is the God who had promised to come to the help of the believers?

When the course of events has made it crystal clear to us that God has abandoned us, then it becomes incumbent upon us who have been living on the strength of our hope in God's help to seek answer to two questions: first, why did it happen, and secondly, what should we do to deserve God's help once again. In other words, as a community, we have to make a reassessment of our collective existence. As long as we are not ready to interrogate our present, it is not possible to find ways for the future.

First, we must understand it clearly that however much we want to claim our relationship with the companions of Prophet Muhammad, the fact remains that as far as our thoughts and actions are concerned, we have a very tenuous relationship with them. The Islam that the Prophet preached and practiced was a different Islam. His life was illuminated by the pages of the Qur'an. In the construction of our religious life, rather than depending on the Qur'an, we have begun to depend on many other self-styled books. The Prophet's Companions had surrendered themselves totally to God and experienced sublime joy, but we have got trapped in lifeless rituals. They were the chosen people who were given total control over history. We only have delusions about being the chosen community, entertaining false belief about our superiority over other people and have become captives of history. Our situation is not much different from that of the Israelites who, despite their dismissal from the privileged position, still consider themselves to be the chosen people of God. For them, piety means mere observance of rituals. As lifeless rituals cannot produce a genuine feeling of piety, that is why our professed return to religion does not produce the desired results. Today, there is no dearth of Muslims who are meticulous in their observance of all the injunctions of Islam. After the end of colonialism, the mosques have become crowded once again, the number of religious seminaries is increasing by the day, and return to the roots of religion is a manifest trend among the Muslim youth throughout the world. However, all these external manifestations of a return to religion have not made us more deserving of Allah's help. And if we do not merit Allah's help, it begs the question whether Allah really wants the kind of worship that we have come to regard as true expression of our piety.

To appreciate better our fallen state of pain and anguish, in the context of the absence of God's help, it will be instructive to

remind ourselves of the Israelites. This is also appropriate due to the fact that the Qur'an, through its frequent allusions to the Israelites, warns us against observance of lifeless rituals. The Israelites, looked upon by us as a cursed and degraded community, are known for their excessive show of religiosity. They consider it essential to consult the rabbis and the jurisprudents even on the smallest details of any and every issue. Be it the details about the Yum Kippur or the Sabbath, or the proper way of slaughtering animals (kosher killing), seeing the meticulous way in which the pious Israelites consider it necessary to abide by the finer details of Talmudic rituals it would appear to anyone that there would scarcely be any other community in the world that had adopted religion in such a perfect way in their lives. The Israelites still believe that they are God's chosen people, and enjoy precedence over other communities of the world in God's favour. This they attribute to their adherence to the Torah because of which, they think, they occupy this privileged position. That is why they took it for granted that God would always stand by them. In Nazi Germany when the Jews became the object of general hatred and when these self-styled chosen people of God found the earth getting too hot for them, the religious scholars and intellectuals among them wondered how God could see his own chosen people face slow extinction? Some said that the words of Torah contain immense hidden potential. The condition of the community could change if specific verses are chanted again and again. Some took the help of Cabbalistic diagrams, some re-established their relationship with rabbinic literature, and some took initiative for organizing collective chanting and meditation. As the situation in Germany and other places got more critical for the Jews, they turned more and more doggedly to their religion. So much so that it was found in concentration and death camps that some were absorbed in religious chanting or muttering incantations under their breath.

Their dogged devotion was evident in the fact that in those camps where even the barest minimum food to sustain their life or clothing to cover their shame was not available, what the inmates desperately wanted, having bribed the prison officials, were books of prayers (*Siddur*) that they followed both individually and collectively. During searches, when these books were confiscated and thrown to fire before them, the pious Israelites would cry out and wondered whether the world wouldn't come to an end in the absence of these religious books. Some Jewish mystics believed that if some particular parts of the Torah were read repeatedly with absorption and help was sought from God, it was bound to come. It is said that in one of the concentration camps, one such mystic found shelter in a pit into which the dead were thrown. He kept himself absorbed in prayer and meditation there. People had begun to call that pit 'the abode of Midrash' (*bait-e Midrash*). However, despite all his piety and severe penitence, God did not come to his rescue.

What could be a greater proof of the religious devotion of the Israelites that even in their most difficult hours, they remained steadfast to all their religious rituals. If they could somehow manage to find a *Teflon* attire or a *tillet* it would bring a wave of joy and excitement in their joyless and dark lives. Donning the *Teflon*, they would perform prayers by turns. So much so that even while marching from one camp to another, if they had a scholar of Talmud among them, they would keep up with their lessons in Talmudic jurisprudence. Whenever there was a respite from the rounds of the prison officials in concentration camps, they would gather to listen to the Torah and the Mishnah being read out to them by the people who knew them by heart. It is said that in the camp at Madanek where three thousand Jews were kept, there was hardly any who wouldn't participate in the daily congregational prayers. One day when they sighted a page of the Talmud on a garbage heap they were beside themselves with joy.

In this camp, Rabbi Ishaq Zanba, used to hold regular sessions where he based his discourses on the same page of the Talmud. Even though their religious books were confiscated in the camps, their attachment to their religion was so deep that they wrapped up their belongings in the pages of the Talmud. The extent of their devotion could be gauged from the fact that even while they pined for a morsel of food, they would happily trade it with the prison officials or give them the gold in their teeth, for a copy of the Torah, or a copy of the prayer book or a particular edition of the *Siddur*. Despite such deep religiosity, their cry for help from God turned out to be a cry in the wilderness. These so-called privileged people of God could not draw His attention through their uttermost demonstration of religiosity.

What happened in the concentration camps in different places in Germany, particularly in Auschwitz, shattered the confidence of the entire community of the Israelites. It is said that about two third of the entire Jewish population of Europe were done to death by the Nazis. This did not happen in a single day. As the heart-rending stories of the concentration and death camps began to come to light, and the Jews of Europe began to realise that their wholesale extinction is imminent, they could not but ask themselves the question – ‘Does God want to empty the world of His chosen people like us? How is it possible that we who are the followers of the Torah, who abide by the Talmud in the conduct of our daily lives, are facing extinction from the world, and yet God’s help is nowhere visible?’ Some even began to doubt whether God is there at all? Was the glorious story of the Israelites that they had always heard mere fiction that had no basis in reality?

Truly speaking, the reality of Auschwitz brought the religious thinking of the Israelites to a crisis. But even then this community, living in their sacred past, was not ready to undertake a reassessment of their religious life. This was not the

first great challenge that they had faced. After the appearance of Jesus Christ, the second destruction of the Solomon's temple, and from then on right up to the present day, their community life has been one of continuous suffering and indignity. Wherever they went, they had to face slander and humiliation. Hardly would they settle down at one place when they had to leave it because of the hostility of the local people. It was clear that when God withdraws his blessings from a community it becomes difficult for it to find a restful place in the whole world. There was no dearth of scholars, intellectuals, artists or wise men among them. They were accustomed to hard work. They were inferior to no one in the accomplishments of the head or heart. They also knew very well how to earn wealth and how to spend it. But when God Himself withdraws His blessings, even the best of the human intellect cannot do anything. It is a pity that even the most intelligent people of the Israelites also could not read the crystal clear writing on the wall. Claiming to be the rightful inheritors of David and Solomon, the Jewish nation continue to delude themselves with the thought that they are the chosen people of God, without whom the journey of history remains incomplete. In the modern times, after the establishment of Israel when they mounted surprise attacks on the slumbering Arabs in 1967 and registered extraordinary success in the six-day long battle, they began to cite this victory as evidence of the fact that God has once again stood by their side. But their God-fearing scholars are shouting from the rooftops that the existence of the state of Israel is not consistent with the Talmudic jurisprudence, nor can one find any trace of the teachings of Torah among the people. The state of Israel derives its sustenance from betrayal and fraud, oppression and barbarity, whereas the teachings of the Torah are compromised day in and day out because of the machinations of the government. How can God be there at the back of such an anti-Torahic state? The communities that prefer

to live in the past refuse to undertake any serious revaluation; all their efforts are directed at offering an explanation of the situation in a way that would save them from such an exercise.

If we examine the issue with open eyes and alert minds we will realize that the current situation of Muslims is not much different from that delineated above. Unfortunately, we have also become accustomed to depend heavily on interpretations of all kinds. Rather than making a proper scrutiny of our failures on all fronts, we choose to delude ourselves with self-styled interpretations that help us turn our eyes from our pitiable situation.

In this critical hour of history, if we too, like the Israelites, stubbornly insist on our own self-styled interpretations, then our end could not be different from theirs, because be it the community of the Israelites or the community of Muslims, our privileged status really lies in our adherence to the Divine Revelation. As long as the Israelites followed the Torah truthfully, their superiority in the world remained unquestioned. But when they built around a hedge of ecclesiastical interpretations around the Torah, and when instead of the Torah, their religious life began to be governed by the jurisprudence produced by the clergy, and the compilations of *Mishnah* and *Gemarah*, and the collections of prayer books and books of benedictions acquired key positions, their relationship with the Divine Revelation grew more and more tenuous. The remainder of the Torah became a prisoner of human elucidation and interpretation, leading to the gradual attenuation of religious devotion. True piety disappeared, only the rituals remained. They became so meticulous in the observance of rituals that even on the most ordinary things of life, they compiled massive volumes of juridical formulations. The rabbinic interpretations of the Torah effectively smothered the religious life of the Israelites. Their scholars and jurists went so far as to declare that as God had entrusted the Torah with them, now they had the absolute

right over it in matters of interpretation and elucidation. Rabbi Akiva was considered a more genuine interpreter of the Torah than Moses. This religion, constructed by the jurists, is today equated with rabbinic Judaism without any reservations. It may be known as the religion of Moses, but the fact is that its relationship, even with the remainder of the Torah, is very tenuous. The Judaism in its current form, which is largely a construction of the Jewish jurists, cannot produce the same impact as was done by the religion of Moses. The fundamental difference between the juridical religion and the revealed religion is that while the latter is directed at inundating the heart and mind of human beings with God's devotion, the former remains trapped in hair-splitting and outward demonstration of rituals that can create only an illusion of devotion. The Divine Revelation illuminates history and provides its adherents the key to its secrets, while the jurists and the rabbis, from an attitude of excessive caution, go on making unending accretions around it, so that the real crux of the Divine Revelation is eventually lost in the accumulation of details. Slowly, excessive dependence on the clergy alienates the community from the effulgence of Divine Revelation, and the religious life is largely propelled by the human interpretations of and commentaries on the Divine Revelation. The fate meted out to the Israelites contains a lesson for us. The pages of the Qur'an are filled with edifying statements about the fate of the Israelites. If we choose to have our eyes open, then we can easily try to find answer in these statements to the question as to why we were dispossessed of the privileged position that rightfully belonged to us, and why God withdrew his blessings from us.

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At a juncture when the intensity of emotion is running high on both sides and there seems no possibility of a just and proper solution of the problem and the followers of Abraham and the racial and spiritual offspring of Isaac and Ishmael are locked in a heinous and deadly battle, what is necessary is that we Muslims should come forward as the followers of the Qur'an and remind people of the forgotten fact that what Allah demands is not Judaism, Christianity or conventional Islam, nor any particular kind of structure, nor the sectarian worship performed therein. The need of the hour is that the pious souls among the children of Abraham should come forward and try to take the land of Palestine out of its present morass, for the sake of God.

One may find an echo of similar thoughts throughout the book. This may serve as a uniting thread as most of these articles were originally to be featured as editorials of futureislam.com. And the repetition of some ideas might be helpful in capturing the reader's attention. Academic notes and references have purposely been withdrawn to make the book more readable. However, I have preserved the academic arguments and citations for the more inquisitive readers and for my future writings on the topic.

Rashid Shaz  
New Delhi

## The Palestinian Problem If Truth be told

**F**or a long time the land of Palestine has been waiting for a just resolution of its problem. Whatever efforts have been undertaken so far on both sides have not produced any encouraging results. If anything, the results are positively discouraging. The loss of human lives is mounting by the day. On the one side we have the state of Israel armed with the most sophisticated weaponry; and on the other side we have a motley group of helpless resistant organisations who do not have any other weapon except their lives. For the last fifty years the hatred against one another has grown more intense; in the charged atmosphere the voice of sanity and wisdom is bound to drown in the cacophony of jingoistic slogans. The current situation is such that human corpses are being piled up on both sides; the only difference is that the pile may be bigger on one side and smaller on the other. The surprising thing is that this battle is being fought between the two communities that consider themselves to be the most devoted followers of God, and both the sides seek the legitimacy of their struggle in their obedience to the God of

Abraham and the sacred relics of their prophets. The religious and political leaders of both the contending parties have given it the aspect of a fight between good and evil. For both, there cannot be any negotiation on even one inch of the land of Palestine, nor can there be any compromise. Under the circumstances, the only logical conclusion one can draw is that the mightier side will win the battle. However, the problem is that in today's world if the states have become extraordinarily powerful because of their technological dominance, on the other side, the guerrilla tactics of the extremist and terrorist organisations have become such a weapon in the hands of the weak and the helpless which no state power can ignore or totally do away with.

The Israelites know it very well that despite the absolute power of their state; it is just not possible to wipe out all the Palestinians from the face of the earth. The Palestinians, too, know that their suicide attacks cannot inflict a deadly blow to the state of Israel, but both the groups are trapped in their self-conceived notion of sacred history in such a way that there seems to be no way out of that impasse. Both the sides have become exhausted after this long war of attrition, but neither side is ready to accept it because of a false sense of national pride.

At this juncture of history when the adherents of Torah and the followers of the Qur'an are locked in a deadly combat and either side claims that it is the rightful inheritor of the holy land, it is necessary that the pious people on both sides whose hearts are filled with the fear of god, who can rise above the considerations of narrow, sectarian advantages and think only of God's pleasure, should come forward and do something in the light of their own religious education and training and create opportunities for dialogue to put an end to this endless cycle of violence and loss of human lives.

Right from the time the state of Israel came into being, a large number of Jewish scholars have considered its establishment to be

against the Torah. According to them, there is no justification for a state for the Israelites before the advent of the messiah. There is also no dearth of courageous thinkers among them who declare the state of Israel to be anti-Semitic in its orientation, where the teachings of the Torah are openly flouted. The criticism of and opposition to the Israeli government mounted by the Jewish scholars themselves on the issue of oppression against the Palestinians has, perhaps, been more intense than any external criticism or opposition. If you read the writings of these God-fearing Jewish scholars and take a look at the movements within Israel against Israeli oppression of the Palestinians, it will become clear that even today there is no dearth of pious souls among them for whom we find words of appreciation in the Qur'an. What is needed is that from the side of Muslims, too, rather than taking extreme nationalistic postures, there should be a strong initiative based on Qur'anic teachings that can probably lead to a Qur'anic solution.

There is no doubt about the fact that from a nationalistic point of view, our case is a fairly strong one. We are the people on whose land a state has been foisted blatantly on the strength of brute power, and thus an unending war has been waged on us. Now, if we believe that there can be no other peaceful solution of the Palestinian problem excepting the fact that the Israeli occupying power should leave and the state of Israel should be wiped out, then no one can accuse us of partiality for taking such a stance. However, if we take it as the last word on the issue it will block all possibilities of dialogue with the rival party. And then, for ending the problem, we will only have those threatening statements that we have been hearing for the last fifty years, and despite abiding by them we have not been able to come anywhere near resolving the problem. In the process, though, we have probably become accustomed to deal with this extremely critical human problem poetically. One sometimes hears such statements

as – “if all the Muslims of the world pour one bucket of water each on Israel, then the state of Israel will be washed away” or “if all the Muslims of the world spit on Israel, the entire state will be drowned in it.” Emotive utterances like these can make our blood race through our veins temporarily, but their practical feasibility is not clear even to those who make such utterances.

On the one side we have the government of the ruthless autocrat Ariel Sharon that has crossed all records of barbarity and human oppression. The whole machinery of the government is steeped in corruption. On the other side we have Arafat and his cronies who have played ducks and drakes with the money received as aid from different countries in the name of the hapless Palestinian people. Neither the rulers of Israel have any concern for the Jewish Faith, nor the objective of the Palestinian authority is to establish a Qur’anic order in Palestine. But the people who are laying down their lives on both sides are doing so because they are imbued with a sense of religious devotion and who believe, in all sincerity, that their martyrdom is a religious duty. Is there any justification to make the sacrifice of so many lives to sustain the rule of Sharon and Arafat or two future states that would be anti-Torah and anti-Qur’an?

If the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority, despite their use of non-religious, even anti-religious idiom, are both able to enlist the support of the extremist religious sections, it is due to the reason that the religious leadership on both sides is trapped, by and large, in history in the name of religion. A concept of history which, because of our attitude of reverence towards the past, has given it a halo of sacredness, and that had no relationship with the real objectives of the Faith. The need of the hour is that, rather than looking at the issue merely from the perspective of the Muslim community, we should try to look at it, with an open mind, from the perspective of the other party as well, and then try to find some practical solution to this immensely complex

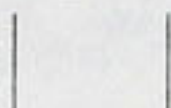
issue in the light Qur'anic insights. The Jews say that merely walking the distance of four square feet in the sacred land Palestine can ensure their entry into paradise. They cannot offer any evidence from the Torah in support of such a superstitious belief. Of course, there is no dearth of such good tidings in the Talmudic literature. They say that their religious life is incomplete without their house of worship. Apart from the sacrificial alter at the Solomon's Temple, they do not have the concept of sacrifice anywhere else. The religious-minded among the Jews who are exploited by the political leadership, who have been praying for ages for the return of the land of Canaan, feel that after some two thousand years they have now been armed with the power to restore the religious life of the Solomon's Temple once again. So, they do not want to miss this historic opportunity. On the other side, the oppression and brutality perpetrated against the Palestinians, their displacement from their own land are facts of contemporary history that no one can ignore. Moreover, the axial position of Masjid Aqsa and Dome of the Rock as the first *qibla* among Muslims has made that part of the Palestinian land as sacred to Muslims as it is to the Jews. That is why any compromise on this holy place is regarded by both the sides as a sell out. The assassination of Anwer Sadat and Isaac Rabin at the hands of their own compatriots highlight the intensity of this feeling on both sides. This is just one aspect of the problem that has played a central role in making the encounters so bloody and ruthless.

At a juncture when the intensity of emotion is running high on the both sides and there seems no possibility of a just and proper solution of the problem and the followers of Abraham and the racial and spiritual offspring of Isaac and Ishmael are locked in a heinous and deadly battle for the same house of worship and when the claimants of the unity of God (*tawhid*) have forgotten that God demands their unconditional surrender rather than their

prayers in a particular mosque or a special kind of prayer house, what is necessary is that we Muslims should come forward as the followers of the Qur'an and remind people of the forgotten fact that what Allah demands is not Judaism, Christianity or conventional Islam, nor any particular kind of structure, nor the sectarian worship performed therein. He considers *كونوا هودا أو نصارى* to be reprehensible and intends people to become part of the pious community of Abraham (*ملة ابراهيم حنيفا*). The need of the hour is that the pious souls among Abraham's community should come forward and try to take the land of Palestine out of its present morass, for the sake of God. They should not care whether their initiatives will earn them the wrath of their own community and will harm their national interest. Sometime ago, when Avram Burg, a member of the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, advised the Israeli state to behave realistically, the Zionist world called him an enemy of the Jews. There is no dearth of people like Avram Burg among the Israelis. However, the problem is that for our understanding of the community of the Israelites, rather than depending on the insights available in the Qur'an, we depend more on Syed Qutub's famous booklet - *معركتنا مع اليهود* where all the Jews, without any distinction, appear to be the mysterious characters of a devilish gang. For a long time we have been prisoners of the commentaries where the statement - *غيرالمغضرب عليهم ولا الضالين* - has been taken, without any distinction, to imply the communities of the Israelites and the Christians. In our extreme antagonism we do not reflect on the fact that the Qur'an which contains the statements by the Most Just Authority cannot exhort people to curse all the future generations of Jews merely because some of the individuals or tribes of this community were nasty to the Prophet and the Muslim community of that time. In the Qur'an, some of the individuals belonging to the Quraish tribe have also been condemned, and warned of terrible consequences in this world

and the world hereafter. Despite this, we cannot think it in our wildest imagination that their offspring should be punished and cursed till the Day of Judgment. Thus, there is no reason why all future generations of a community should be cursed and condemned for the mischief of some members of one generation. A similar situation obtains with the religious thinking of the Israelites. They have decided, under the influence of Talmudic interpretations, that other communities of the world stand nowhere in comparison with the earlier community of Jews. Their blood is cheap and their cultures worthless. The need of the hour is that we should abandon all these stereotypes and conventional thinking on the problem of Palestine and look at it anew in the light of the deeper insights from the Qur'an. Only then will we be able to save the lives being lost on a daily basis, and the historical land of Palestine will be a place where people of the Book from different Faiths can render their prayers, as in the past. Where have those steadfast and pious souls of the people of the Book gone about whom the Qur'an says that they would wake up at night and keep praying to God, and for whom the Qur'an promises that their good actions would not go unrewarded? (وما يفعلوا من خير فلن يكفروه) Along with it, we also must search for the God-fearing souls amongst us who can display extraordinary courage in rising above narrow national interest and can assert: 'O People of the Book come to common terms as between us and you that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not, from amongst ourselves, lords and patrons other than Allah'. (Qur'an, 3:64).

*(Note: This article was written before the sad demise of Yasser Arafat)*



The foundation of revolution that was laid at the time of the Prophet did not yield all its results immediately, or during the life of the Prophet. Had it been so, then the final Prophet and the history of the succeeding ages would have lost much of their importance. Those who think that the results that were not visible during the Prophet's lifetime should not have come to light in the later ages are not really aware of the significance of the concept of the last Prophet, and do not understand the real import of the eternal nature of the Qur'an.

## Can a Muslim Woman Lead Congregational Prayers?

Can a Muslim woman lead Friday Congregation, and that too in a situation where the congregation includes many men, in addition to women? This is the vital, juridical question which is agitating the Muslim world, and on which the jurisprudents and other influential personages of the world are engaged in putting across their views from their own individual perspectives. Shaikh Yusuf Al-Qardhawi who holds special place of prestige in the Muslim world because of his erudition has strongly opposed such a move, characterising it as a deviation from the true Islamic path. On the other hand, the Shaikh Al-Azhar and many other religious scholars do not reject or dismiss the idea of women leading congregational prayers out of hand, but rather put forward the view that the imamhood by women should be limited to all-female congregations. The ulema belonging to traditional schools of thought in Saudi Arabia and India, however, have declared it to be a sinful act. These scholars are infuriated by the fact that at a time when the Muslim world is under severe attack from external forces, these women have

chosen to attack the community from within. What, after all, they want to achieve by raising this issue at this juncture? They fear that such an ill-advised move will, in the final analysis, benefit only the enemies of Islam. And the entire community of Muslims will be thrown into utter chaos and confusion.

What is really needed is that rather than getting agitated and worked up over the issue, we must reflect over it calmly as to how best to address it. Islamically speaking, if one reflects on the question as to who is better qualified to lead a congregational prayer, the following factors will be taken into consideration: (a) a person who is superior in piety (*taqwa*); (b) one who has a better understanding of the religion and who possess deeper insight into it; and (c) one who knows better how to recite the Qur'an, keeping its phonetic and semantic properties in mind. The gender question will not acquire primacy here, that is to say, whether the person possessing the above qualities is a man or a woman. This is because the Qur'an never endorsed any racial or gender discrimination. In the Qura'nic *weltanschauung* one does not find any corroboration of the view that being a woman by itself becomes a demerit or disqualification, either socially or in matters of religion. This is the Qur'anic perspective as far as the question of imamhood of women is concerned. As for the question as to how the jurists think on the issue, it should be kept in mind that history is replete with instances in which they (i.e., the jurists) have declared as 'strictly forbidden' (*haram*) acts that were merely 'undesirable' (*mubah*). The basis for such injunctions was the fear that perpetuation of such 'undesirable' acts might be the cause of some mischief in the community. Take for instance, the question of women's entry into the mosque, the most basic social institution of Muslims. The history of Islam down the ages and the continuing practices by the Ummah bear witness to the fact that right from the time of the Prophet up to the contemporary times, there has been provision for women's

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Instead of relying solely on the wisdom of the dead souls or mindlessly quoting from this scholar or that seer, the time has come to apply our own minds, to look into the Qur'an for a fresh guidance in our time. Unless we realize that we too, like our ancestors, have been endowed with heads on our shoulders and that the sole function of our head is not just to place a cap or a *tarbush* on it, we cannot put aside the intellectual garbage that we have so willingly accumulated in the course of our centuries long intellectual journey.

entry into mosques, if it was considered necessary or expedient. This tradition still continues at the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's mosque in Medina. Even though some rulers and Islamic scholars in the past tried to put a ban on the circumambulation of the Ka'ba by both the sexes constituting the same congregation, but these efforts proved futile. In this context, history books even record widespread condemnation of a renowned traditionist (*muhaddith*) like A'tta. However, in places that were away from the sacred site of Hijaz, local influence prevailed over the thoughts of jurists and they restricted the role of women in society. They did this with one specific objective in mind -- that the increased independence of women and their unrestricted entry into the mosque might not cause further dissensions and conflict in the already decadent Muslim society. If the moral or spiritual condition of Muslim men was low and pitiable, then the logical thing was to strive for its correction and improvement. On the contrary, it so happened that women were penalised for it and they were ejected from such central sites as the mosque.

The story did not end here. In the age of decadence when a general atmosphere of gloom and despair prevailed in the Muslim society, to preserve the religion in its true form, it was felt necessary that women should be subjected to additional modes of *hijab* in addition to the compulsory veiling. In consequence, exposure of palm and face which was considered permissible in the early era of Islam, and many arguments from books of tradition and history can be adduced in support of this even today, was declared to be impermissible. Even though the exposure of face is still an unresolved issue among the Muslim scholars, it cannot be denied, however, that as a result of the widespread public perception that veiling the face is the most appropriate and cautious step for preserving the Faith, a vast segment of the Muslim community began to take it to be the

correct interpretation of the Faith. The same attitude of caution is at work here, that is, even after covering the entire body, if the face remained exposed, it would not be possible to stop mischief from taking place in the society that was already on the path of decadence. To make matters worse, in some circles one finds the idea fairly common that it is forbidden for strangers to even hear the voice of women. In some Muslim societies, it is still considered against the Islamic values to reveal the name of women or introduce them to others. Muslim women suffered most grievously because of this cautionary philosophy. Its perpetuation for centuries has rendered them faceless, nameless and without any voice. She had to forgo her social and religious role as a Muslim woman. While those who had taken up the project of arresting the process of decadence in the Muslim community concentrated all their efforts on how to control Muslim women, and correcting the ways of men disappeared from their programme of action. Even today, those who want to reject the social, political and religious leadership of women simply because they think that this will open floodgates of dissensions and conflicts in the community are merely following the path of the ancestors that had, in fact, speeded up the process of decadence in the community.

The core of Islamic belief lies in self-surrender, and this self-surrender is demanded of men as much as of women. We should not have the slightest reservation in admitting the fact that Allah and His Prophet know much better (than us) which particular thing can cause mischief in the society and which particular act or practice will help maintain peace and a kind of equilibrium. If Allah had allowed the Muslim women the right to participate in the social and religious life in the mosque, and if the Prophet endorsed and maintained it during his lifetime, then we do not have the right to deprive women of this right after so many centuries on the basis of our inferior understanding of the tenets

of Faith. Even an ordinary student of Islamic history knows that it was usual for women during the Prophet's time to move about freely, their names and faces were known to people, and that they conducted business and trade. During the period of the Pious Caliphs, their advice was sought on political matters. A nondescript, flat-nosed woman thought it her duty, and could take the liberty, to reprimand Caliph Omer in public on what she considered an error in his interpretation during a congregational address. If we keep in mind this environment of comparative openness in the initial stages of Islam then the idea of a woman leading a congregational prayer does not seem to be such an astonishing one. Dr Hamidullah, in his *Bhawalpur Address*, has mentioned two such instances of women leading congregational prayers in the first century of Islam. Even if these instances were not recorded in books of history, we should not have much difficulty in appreciating the fact that the benchmark of piety (taqwa) that Islam has made mandatory for all those who want to be spiritually elevated, leaves no scope for discrimination on the basis of race, region, complexion or gender. The Qur'an has made it abundantly clear that the good acts of a person cannot be dismissed or undervalued simply because he belongs to a particular group or sex. The Qur'anic verse -

﴿يَتَأْتِيهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاهُمْ مِّن ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا﴾

﴿إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِندَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاهُمْ﴾ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ ﴿١٣﴾ (الحجرات: 13)

promises every human being that none of his good actions will be lost. Further, the verse -

﴿وَلَا تَكْسِبُ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ إِلَّا عَلَيْهَا وَلَا تَزِرُ وَازِرَةٌ وِزْرَ أُخْرَىٰ﴾ ﴿٤٧﴾

states that every person will have to face the consequences of his actions. And that - كل نفس بما كسبت رهينة - i.e., every person will be rewarded according to his deserts, and all external identities will be useless. Moreover, when both for men and women the same

principle of صبغة الله ('Take the colour of Allah') is to be applied, how can a man offer only his 'manhood' to claim superiority over a woman who is superior to him in terms of her good practice and piety? The Qur'an announced destruction for such a mighty monarch as the Pharaoh, and such a powerful man as Abu Lahab. On the other hand, it announced good tidings for the entire people of Saba under the leadership of the truth-loving queen of Saba. In other words, all distinctions of sex, colour, race, region that human beings inherit by birth have been declared to be invalid, and it was made crystal clear that what is dear to Allah is one's good actions or practices (*amal-e-saalih*). This is the only quality that will determine the position of Muslims in the Islamic society. The Qur'an goes so far as to exhort that even good people from other communities should be treated with respect, and that their good actions, too, would not go waste. We are adherents of the Book that repeatedly, and at many places, affirms that all unnatural distinctions of colour, race, gender, territory, north and south, Arab and non-Arab, have been rendered invalid. What will come to one's rescue on the Day of Judgment, when Allah Himself will decide what is genuine and what is fake, are one's good actions and practices. Prior to this, no responsible or God-fearing person can dare to declare someone to be a sinner or a denizen of hell, because Allah has reserved this decision for that Day.

From the stage of a totally disempowered entity (بأي ذنب قتلت) to the stage of religious and political leadership, women have traveled a long way. The movement for the restoration of human dignity initiated by the Prophet had had far reaching consequences for people living in distant corners of the world. Not only have the Muslims been benefited from the good results yielded by this movement but that other disadvantaged sections of the society belonging to other religions too benefited from them. Families suffering under the weight of usury for generations

heaved a sigh of relief; the institution of slavery slowly disappeared from the face of the earth. Similarly, the barbarous tradition of keeping women enslaved to men came to an end. The revolutionary message of the assertion that 'believing men and women are helpers of one another'

﴿وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتُ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَاءُ بَعْضٍ﴾ (التوبة: 71)

ignited the idea that in the path of total surrender to Allah both men and women would be equal partners.

The foundation of revolution that was laid at the time of the Prophet did not yield all its results immediately, or during the life of the Prophet. Had it been so, then the final Prophet and the history of the succeeding ages would have lost much of their importance. Those who think that the results that were not visible during the Prophet's lifetime should not have come to light in the later ages, or those who insist on the idea that the acts not performed during the Prophet's time and performed in the later ages should be taken as signs of the approaching doomsday, are not really aware of the significance of the concept of the last Prophet, and do not understand the real import of the eternal nature of the Qur'an. If it were not so, then what answer they can possibly have to the question that the way the Qur'an exhorts the followers of Islam to treat slaves cannot be implemented in the present day context as the old institution of slavery is no longer there. How can we deny the fact which is crystal clear that the inevitable consequence of the Qura'nic exhortations regarding compassionate treatment of slaves and freeing them from bondage was the gradual disappearance of this institution? In other words, these exhortations signalled the beginning of a great social revolution, not its end. Their real impact could be seen not at the moment but many years later. Similarly, after reading instructions in the Qur'an regarding *Zakah* no one draws the conclusion that the Qur'an intends to perpetuate poverty, i.e., a section of the people in society must remain poor so that rich people can show

kindness towards them and thus discharge their duties. The case of the evolutionary status of women is somewhat similar to this. During the Prophet's time women were taken to be equal to men and they were accorded social roles. One inevitable consequence of this was that in the coming years women would claim their position of dignity and prominence in society on the basis of their knowledge and piety. The foundation that Islam laid for the empowerment of women had had far-reaching results, even outside Muslim societies. The movement for women's emancipation in the west, their participation in social and political processes, right to express their individual opinions, guarantee for individual freedom etc. did not come to them out of the blue one fine morning. Behind them, too, can be seen the impact of the revolution initiated by the Prophet that had reached the west through cultural exchanges spanning over centuries. Of course, because of indifference to the message of the Divine Revelation, the west is now a victim of the excesses of individual freedom.

Human society is always in a constant process of evolution. The movement for human rights that the Prophet had started in Mecca was, in fact, unstoppable. In the march of human history, those whose gaze cannot see beyond Magna Carta or those who think that human history was like a stagnant pool before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights give evidence of their own ignorance only. Today, all the concerns that are being voiced for preserving human rights and dignity, be it about saving the earth from nuclear destruction, saving the environment, concerns about the extinction of not only human beings but some endangered species of animals, air pollution, maintaining the natural warmth of oceans etc, could be traced back to the teachings of the Prophet. In the Muslim society today, if the women have a feeling that they have been pushed to the margins in the patriarchal system, and in the effort to restore their rightful

position muster up enough courage to claim such positions as leading congregational prayers, it cannot be considered to be an entirely alien thought in the light of the past history of Islam. The need of the hour is that instead of behaving like strangers to our own cultural heritage, we should see the issue in a larger perspective. In the context of any human practice, not excepting the attitude characterized by the instruction 'compete with each other in good acts and try to take precedence in it' (فاستبقوا الخيرات), people might commit excesses, but they need not alarm us as these can always be corrected. However, if we simply reject such efforts by saying that it is a plot hatched by the enemies of Islam or that it is an evil thought emanating from the over-active imagination of misguided Muslims, then we will not be able to arrive at a correct understanding of the issue.

It is true that in the history of Islam spanning over fourteen centuries, if we leave out some exceptional occasions, there has been no continuing tradition of having women as imams leading congregational prayers. However, alongside this fact it cannot be denied too that Muslim men had shown very little reservations about accepting women as jurisprudents, thinkers or teachers. If we abide by the principle that all the impact of the Islamic movement was not manifested during the Prophet's time, and that some of its impact manifested itself in succeeding years and ages too, and that the dream of establishing a global society based on the teachings of the Prophet is yet to come about, and this is precisely the *raison d'être* for the last Prophet and his followers, then a significant transformation would take place in our way of thinking. And then, rather than branding the issue of women's claim to *imamah* as a mischief and a sign of the approaching doomsday, we will try to assess it in the light of insights derived from the Qur'an. We feel that those who consider women's claim for *imamat* as destructive of the Faith do not have the courage to assess the issue in the light of the Qur'an or do not feel the

necessity to do so. For them the interpretation made by the ancients and the edicts issued by them constitute the final verdict on every issue, so much so that they consider any debate on such verdicts to be an exercise in mischief-mongering. Such an attitude cannot be supported as a principled stand simply because for a futuristic religion like Islam, a religion that has to lead mankind till the Last Hour should not be made subservient to the interpretation by some scholars of the past. If we do so, it will be tantamount to suspending the message of the Divine Revelation and its main objectives. Unfortunately, for a long time, it has become customary for Muslims to see the Qur'an simply as a book of benedictions rather than one of reflection and contemplation. We are not ready to accept the fact that our ancient predecessors, too, were human beings like us, and were liable to error in their readings and interpretation of the divine verses, in their efforts to derive commandments and in their efforts to correlate contending traditions, and in their efforts to decide things through intuition or expediency. We are not compelled to carry on the burden of their mistakes of omission and commission. Aren't our own mistakes cause for enough worry for ourselves that we should consider it necessary to carry on the burden of mistakes left by our predecessors? The need of the hour is that instead of operating within the axis of the old jurisprudence, and fretting and fuming over the problem, we must try to resolve this delicate, sensitive and extremely important issue in the light of Islam's evolutionary journey through fourteen centuries. However, for the new thinkers it will be necessary that just as they should adopt a sceptical attitude towards the old system of jurisprudence and the contemporary social and political impact on it, they must also refuse, as far as possible, to accept the influences exerted by current social and political trends and thoughts.

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It is high time to question each and every bit of our heritage literature. There is nothing beyond criticism except the words of God and the proven *Sunnah* of the Prophet. There are no security zones for worn out dogmatic beliefs and no issues beyond the scope of rational investigation. Unless we put the entire historical Islam under intense scrutiny we cannot pin-pointedly say where we went wrong.

## Conventions should not be mistaken for Islam

*(Convocation Address delivered at a seminary for women in Bangalore, India)*

**T**his is not the first occasion when I have had the opportunity to visit a religious educational institution meant for women. However, what delighted me the most here is the expression of your deep longing to spread the message of the True Faith in the world, of which I had a glimpse in your painting competition. To speak the truth, you have put me in a difficult position by making me the judge of the event. Though I am not an expert in the field, yet intellectually, I very much liked the painting in which a student of six or seven years has depicted her longing for the dominance of Islam in the world. May Allah make all of us realise this dream of ours sooner rather than later.

It was apparent from the speeches made by students in the afternoon sessions that your institution is not like any other conventional educational institution. Your teachers have the deep awareness that they are preparing you for the future Islamic revolution. That such a small institution is undertaking a momentous task like this entitles you to the highest accolade of the community.

## What shall we do now?

**T**he House of Islam is at a turning point today. Muslims around the world are asking themselves: should they reinvent in the new situation or else, allow themselves to perish on the margins of history? As for this sharp-edged vital question, the Muslim mind is alarmingly confused.

Those aware of our centuries long history can rightly point out that the danger is not new though unique it may be, that earlier too we had grappled with such situations of gloom. Confronted yet again with a major crisis, probably the fifth one in our history - the earlier four being; the civil strife leading to the death of the third Caliph, the sack of Abbasid Baghdad, the fall of Grenada, and the termination of the Ottoman Caliphate - we however appear to be devoid of a vision for the future. The psychological fall out of 'war on terror', the direct occupation of Iraq, the colonization of Afghanistan, the subjugation of Libya and Iran, the continued humiliation of Pakistan and other Muslim nations in the face of American imperialism and the ever changing stance of our ulema/ intellectuals on issues of strategic importance have reinforced the notion that, at bottom, our intellectual crisis is

On this occasion when all of you – boys and girls – are going to obtain your degrees and then enter practical life, it is in the fitness of things that I should tender some advice to you. Whatever you have learnt so far from your studies, and I am saying it specifically to girl students, the way you have expressed your desire to sacrifice everything for the propagation of Islam, and the way you have chalked out your programme to spread awareness among Muslim women, may not appear to be so easy when you begin to work on the ground. It is quite possible that your own society, i.e., Muslim society may not approve of or appreciate your good intention and dedication to your religion. It may not like the idea that you should come out of the narrow confines of the kitchen and raise the banner of Islam's dominance over the world. It can also happen that those people and those members of your family from whom you had expected cooperation and support would turn against you. They may very well say to you, 'Daughter, whatever you are saying may be true, but the society does not approve of your ways. That is why it is better that you give up your agenda, even if temporarily.' I want that you should be ready for such criticism from now on so that when the challenges do come your way you are prepared to face them. You will not be discouraged and dissuaded from your path. It should also be clear that you have been entrusted with the grave responsibility of disseminating Islam and its revolutionary message. As regards the religious concepts prevalent in the Muslim society currently or the social restrictions, customs and traditions which are widespread, they should be respected as long as they have a respectful attitude towards the message of Islam. It should not happen that the things and events that the Muslim society had invested with holiness because of social expediency or historical compulsions should be taken to be the real Islam by you. God forbid, if such a thing happens then in place of being zealous

advocates of Islam you will turn out to be the advocates of Indo-Islamic culture.

To clarify this, let me point out to you that the way we Muslims practice Islam in our daily life sends the message to the non-Muslim that this indeed is the real and proper Islam. Thus, many of our wrong actions present a false image of Islam before other people. Each and every mistake committed by us presents an extremely distorted image of our religion to others. This is especially true of the concepts that have become entrenched in our society regarding women. People mistakenly take them to be Islamic concepts. That is why in your practical life you should strive hard to follow only the real Islam and keep away from conventions. These conventions may have been prevalent in the Muslim society for a long time and may have been invested with a certain kind of holiness because of whatever reasons.

In this country of ours women have been accorded a despicable position for centuries. In the Hindu society women have been regarded as mere adjunct to men. There would hardly be any culture or religion except Islam where one finds the image of a woman as an independent entity, with her own individual identity. What, in fact, has happened in the Muslim society in India is that slowly many non-Islamic concepts pertaining to women, have crept in among Muslims. There was a kind of general consensus on the issue that the potentialities of women can find their best expressions only in the kitchen, or that women can at best do small, odd domestic jobs in the house with quiet efficiency. As for the question whether she can also have an intellectual self like men, and that she can also have sound judgments, the answer was mainly in the negative. In fact, such questions gradually disappeared from the collective memory of the Muslim community. The negligence of women reached such an extent that in the traditional religious families, all the resources were invested in the education of men, but women were

regarded undeserving of such an investment. If ever the issue of women's education was brought before religious circles, it was agreed that women could acquire some little education at home, they could learn a bit of the Urdu language, and that they could acquire the skills whereby they would be able to read the Qur'an by sight, and that was all. Ashraf Ali Thanvi, the famous Muslim religious scholar of the Indian sub-continent also imposed the condition that it was desirable that such education be imparted by women teachers and free of cost. According to him, knowledge is its own reward. As for the question whether equal opportunities for higher education should be available to women like men, even the most enlightened section of our religious hierarchy did not agree to this. Even Sir Syed Ahmed Khan who is regarded as the greatest pioneer of education among Muslims and who had spearheaded a movement for the education of Muslims despite stiff opposition from the community, did not accept the fact that women too have equal rights to higher education, just like men. Sir Syed declared it unambiguously that he was not ready to impart education to women and thus make them aware of their rights under Islam. In his words, 'Illiterate women are unaware of their rights and that is why they remain happy. If they acquire education and become aware of their rights as women, then their lives will become a hell.'

When the most enlightened scholars of the community opposed women's education merely because of the fear that they should not be aware of the rights given to them under Islam, you can well imagine the obscurantism of the people who are not so enlightened and who consider the opinions expressed by anyone who appears to be a learned person simply by virtue of his external appearance to be the real Islam, and what kind of misconceptions they will entertain about the status of women in Islam. On the one hand, there was this attitude prevalent in Muslim society of depriving women of education; on the other

hand, we have the categorical statement by Prophet Mohammad before us: 'It is obligatory for all Muslim men and women to acquire education'.

The Muslim society in India made all efforts so that Muslim women should not acquire their real status in society, and that they should not be made aware of their responsibilities for leading the society in the correct direction. So much so that there was a time, and that time was not long ago, when religious scholars wrote articles in which they opposed learning of writing by women. On top of it, this attitude was sought to be endorsed by Islam and the *shariah*. The ideas that did not have the remotest connection with Islam were considered desirable merely as a measure of expediency or resolving specious disputes. A cycle of self-styled interpretations began on the basis of which even Allah's Book and the Sunnah, and many clear instructions emanating from them stood abrogated. It was forgotten that no individual was entitled to augment or reduce the rights given to women by Allah and His Prophet. Some things might appear to us to be opposed to social harmony, but Islam is the name of the religion that instructs us as follows: 'You accept whatever the Prophet gives you and stay away from the things he forbids'.

When women are not regarded to be deserving of higher education and they are confined to the four walls of the house, they remain ignorant of whatever is happening in the outside world, and their opinions in the affairs of the world carry no weight. In such a situation it is only natural that a section of the community will remain devoid of intelligence and understanding, unaware of the problems of the Ummah and without any idea of how to become good and useful members of the Ummah. It is obvious that the children born from the womb of such illiterate women cannot become aware of or carry out the lofty mission of life. These illiterate mothers have played an important role in the decline of the Ummah.

What happened, unfortunately, in our decadent feudal society was that the false concept of honour created by or associated with that society was taken to be an Islamic concept. It gave currency to the idea that the ideal image of a woman in Muslim society is that of a person who was totally secluded from the world outside her home and about whom people should not know anything. Her individual identity was totally negated, so much so that it was considered a social taboo for the outsiders to have any familiarity even with her name. No one should hear her voice, no one should get to know about her innermost thoughts. The worldly affairs were controlled exclusively by men. In this set up it was expected that women should merely obey men in whatever they said, even if it was wrong. The only parameter for judging whether something said was correct was that whether it was uttered by men. The way our topmost religious leaders instructed women to obey their husbands in all circumstances slowly blurred the distinction between right and wrong. The standard by which to measure truth and falsehood broke down. Women were not allowed even the right to judge the instructions given to her by her husband in the light of the Book and the Sunnah, and express her reservation in the mildest way, if the instructions ran counter to the Book and the Sunnah. It was expected of her that she should obey the commands of her husband without any kind of opposition. Though this attitude has nothing to do with Islam, but the instructions related to obedience that were imparted to her in the name of religion created the general impression that Islam really demanded such obedience from women. Ashraf Ali Thanvi who has left a great impact on Muslim thinking, and his well known book, *Baheshti Zewar* has been very popular among Muslim women. As a matter of fact, from all indications it can perhaps be said that this book is taken to be the most reliable source book of Islam after the Qur'an by them. In that book, too, it is demanded of women that they should carry out the

commands of their husbands blindly. Maulana Thanvi writes in *Baheshti Zewar*: 'Women should carry out the orders of their husbands without the slightest reservation. Even to the extent that if he asks her to carry a heavy piece of rock from one mountain to another, and then to a third, she should be ready to do so.' At another place he writes: 'If he calls the day to be night she should also be accustomed to do so.' Now, if such unqualified obedience is regarded to be the real Islam in the Muslim society, then what to speak of righteous women to emerge from that society, even the distinction between right and wrong gets progressively blurred.

Dear sisters, you must remember that in Islam both men and women have their distinct status. Both will have to render their accounts before Allah. On the Day of Judgment you will not be able to exonerate yourself by saying that your husband, brother or father had ordered you to commit transgression, and that is why they should be responsible for your actions. You must understand that if, unfortunately, the male members of your family have become accustomed to living in sin, if they have severed all connections with Islam and the Islamic movement, it would not provide justification for committing sin on your part. No, surely not. They are responsible for their actions and you are responsible for your actions. Of course, in such a situation you will have to shoulder double responsibility. Not only that you should remain steadfast in the way of the Faith but you should strive through all possible means to bring all the other members of your family to the path of Islam. This is the true Islamic attitude. If, unfortunately, the husband is indulging in sin, and if acts contrary to the commands of Allah and His Prophet are being committed in your house, then it is not proper for you to remain passive and resign to your fate. As a matter of fact, this is what is expected of women in traditional Muslim families, that the wife should submit to the wishes of the husband without any

protest. It is regrettable that even conventional Islamic religious books also render similar kind of advice to women. *Baheshti Zewar* and such other books will endorse such a stance. Maulana Thanvi has written that if the husband has liaison with another woman then the wife, in privacy, should try to dissuade him from doing so. If he still persisted in his sinful ways then the wife should exercise patience. In this context, the Maulana has recorded an anecdote relating to a woman from Lucknow whose husband had liaison with a prostitute. He not only made his relationship with this woman public but also used to have his wife cook food for the prostitute. The obedient and loyal wife protested in the beginning but then submitted gladly to the wishes of her husband. The Maulana recorded approvingly that the people of the entire city appreciated the wife's loyalty to her husband, and everyone praised her. In our opinion this image of womanhood is not consistent with the Islamic concept of a righteous Muslim woman. We have the clear command of the Prophet before us: 'Obedience cannot be obligatory in sinful acts'.

Islam wishes to establish a pure and morally just social system where each individual, imbued with religious zeal, has the right to show others the rightful way. Rather, it becomes his obligation to do so. Even a younger person can politely point out the mistakes of a person older than him. In matters of following the good and avoiding evil, there is no distinction between young and old, men and women. If for any reason your husband strays away from the right path it is your duty to strive in all possible ways to bring him back to it. It should not happen that both of you should pave your way to hell in the name of obedience as it is conventionally understood.

Daughters of Islam, when you will enter practical life after obtaining your degrees, you will have to constantly face up to the misconceptions prevalent in the Muslim society about women.

You will often feel that the Muslim society is not ready to allow you to do things that have not only been allowed but even recommended by Islam. During the Gulf war of 1991, about forty to fifty Muslim women had come out on the road driving their cars in the city of Riyadh. In a way, it was an indirect demand that women should be allowed to drive cars while observing *hijab*. The event had created great commotion in the conservative Muslim society of Saudi Arabia. Consultative meetings were held, Muslim religious scholars engaged themselves in discussions and debates, to find a way out of this impasse. I myself was present in an assembly of religious scholars where spirited discussions were going on. I said that in normal circumstance a Saudi woman was compelled to go out in a car driven by a foreign driver. Often it so happens that when her husband is busy in his office the wife has to go out with the driver who is a stranger and with whom she is not allowed to mix up. Now, if women are allowed to drive while observing the injunctions regarding *hijab*, then they will get rid of the drivers who are strangers to them. And this situation will be preferable in the eyes of the *shariah* than the earlier situation. But the scholars responded by saying, 'You are right. But the problem is that once they begin to hold the steering of the car you will not be able to control them anymore'. The age-old traditions of the Saudi society would not allow women to drive cars, while Islam allows women to move about in the society in normal circumstances as long as they observe the instructions regarding *hijab*. In your practical life you may often find that social traditions and Islamic values run counter to one another, and you should have no reservations in rejecting social traditions and accepting Islamic values, even if you have to face the stiffest opposition.

The final degrees awarded to you today is indicative of the confidence reposed in you by this institution that you have acquired the capability to distinguish truth from falsehood in the

light of the Book and the Sunnah. By the grace of Allah you are now aware of the demands of the Book and the Sunnah. Now you have to see that whether the steps taken by you are endorsed by the Book and the Sunnah. To speak the truth your real task is that like others you should not confuse established traditions with Islam. When the measuring standards in the form of the Book and the Sunnah are available to you, you should judge everything on the crucible of these standards. Accept the things that pass the test and reject those that are not endorsed by the *shariah*, even if you find statements by great Islamic scholars in their support. This is because for us only the commandments of Allah and His Prophet are to be taken as definitive proofs.

If you leave aside Allah's Book and the Sunnah of the Prophet and make something else your standard of judgment, or you rely simply on great names in Islamic scholarship and consider their understanding and interpretation of Islam to be perfect, then you will not be able to derive any advantage from the education that you have acquired here. You must benefit from the insights of great Muslim divines, as also you must benefit from the writings of old and new scholars who engaged with issues pertaining to Islam from time to time, but you must keep it firmly imprinted on your mind that while deciding on any issue, only the statements by Allah and His Prophet should have the key role. You will be surprised to know that even in the cases of some established Muslim thinkers, because of their blind adherence to traditions, you can encounter such thoughts that you will find difficult to accept. As a matter of fact, your real test is this. In comparison with readers who are unaware of this and accepts everything that emanates from Muslim scholars of great repute as actual commandments of Islam, you should be different and you must judge everything in the light of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. If you do so you will see how amazingly different some of the instructions are. You might think that after studying the Book

and the Sunnah you have become equipped to provide constructive suggestions to your husband in your practical life. But a religious attitude predicated upon traditions will not accept this role of yours. Without going too far in this context, I present to you an example from Imam Ghazali's famous book, *Ahya al-Uloom*. The author of *Ahya al-Uloom* has written this on the authority of Caliph Omer: 'Decide your actions against the wishes of women because there lies blessedness. Invite suggestions from women and act against those suggestions'. Now, on the one hand, you will claim that you have become capable of offering suggestions to your husband in the light of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, but the traditional religion will not accept you in that role. Imam Ghazali has written the following regarding Hasan Basri: 'One who remains subservient to his wife, and does as she wishes him to do, Allah will hurl such a person to hell upside down'. This and similar other statements are directed towards keeping women away from the role of advisors. These statements are not in consistent with the image of women portrayed in Islam. Even in a critical moment like the battle at Hudaibiyah, the Prophet thought it desirable to seek advice from his wife, Umme Salma. You will remember that when, as a result of the truce at Hudaibiyah there was general disaffection among the Prophet's Companions, so much so that they had reservations about carrying out the instructions of their beloved Prophet, at that moment Umme Salma had advised the Prophet to be the first to make the sacrifice of the animal by slashing its windpipe, so that seeing his strong will and determination others would be inspired to follow his example. It happened exactly as she had predicted. So, on the one hand we have the example provided by the Prophet where right advice given by women is accepted, and on the other there are traditional religious books that dismiss any advice coming from women as worthless.

more acute and our religious thought more muddled than what meets the eye. In fact, we do not know where we go from here.

Our waywardness is a logical outcome of our self-engineered ouster from the seat of authority and guidance, the God-ordained status of the chosen Ummah. The very first crisis of our history, the civil strife leading to a situation when center could not hold, eventually set us on the course of perpetual crises. With the murder of Othman not only the political authority was weakened but the very 'spatial atmosphere' of Revelation in which Muslims of the first generation breathed was sent to exile. Since then we Muslims have been journeying centrifugally away from the pure revelatory *weltanschauung*. The message of Islam, that sharp-edged revolutionary dicta of human dignity and liberation that once had taken the world by storm lost its primal sheen because of the new Muslim colour it had acquired. Confronted with technological might of western imperialism, today when we desperately need, more than ever before, that razor sharp revolutionary dicta, the mesmerizing and sublime power of revelation, we find it transformed into a set of lifeless rituals. Having been charged to lead the history till the end of time, we have yet to realize cosmic dimension of our crises. The world without us is doomed to failure. But before we go ahead to reinstate ourselves once again in the seat of leadership and guidance we need to set our own house in order, or so to say, rediscover the divine light of revelation that once showed us our way.

The movement for Islamic Awakening so vociferously launched in the latter half of the twentieth century and the general mood of jubilation that marked the inception of fifteenth century Hijra celebrations made us believe as if a new dawn was imminent. The emergence of pan-Islamic forums in the heartland of Islam further strengthened the belief that a future Muslim Common Wealth can set our caravan to the road of glory. The 1979 revolution in Iran,

You should be grateful to Allah that the knowledge of the Qur'an and the Sunnah is accessible to you. In the prevailing atmosphere in the Muslim society characterised by decay you will have to chart out your own ways. If you can separate Faith from the overbearing burden of traditions it will be easier for you to move ahead.

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The statement that Allah would send a *mujaddid* in each century cannot be a saying of the Prophet for this simple reason alone that the concept of the Hijra century had not come into vogue during his period. The counting of the calendar year from the time of Hijra was instituted by Caliph Omer. Another thing which is even more significant than this is – how will the *mujaddid* be identified in each century? There are no instructions regarding this. In the absence of any clear instructions about the identity of such a significant leader, how can people benefit from his emergence?

## Islam Needs New Interpreters

**T**he edict issued by the Deoband seminary on the Imrana episode and its subsequent endorsement by Muslim Personal Law Board has proved beyond doubt that our religious institutions are not only unaware of contemporary realities, but that the luminaries at the helm of affairs in these institutions have no proper understanding of the Qur'an as well. The Qur'anic verse on which this edict has been based is quite simple and transparent, free from any kind of ambiguity. The meaning of the verse, لا تتكحوا ما نكح آبائكم is - 'Do not enter into marriage contract with those women whom your fathers happened to marry'. That is to say, if any woman, at any point of time, happened to be married to someone's father, then subsequently, in the event of their divorce or the death of the father, it will not be permissible for the son to enter into marriage with that woman. Whoever reads this verse without any preconceived notion would not think even in his wildest imagination of the complicated interpretive views of

jurisprudents on this episode, that have resulted in the issue of conflicting and contradictory statements on the Imrana affair.

The current state of affairs has compelled the thinking sections among the Muslim community to ponder whether the future of the community will be safe in the hands of these traditional institutions and the ulema who run them. Indian Muslims have always displayed extraordinary sensitivity and a cautious attitude towards their religion. They have spearheaded quite a few organised movements for the sake of their religion and the *shariah*, and made great sacrifices for them. They have always thought that the Muslim seminaries are the fortresses of Islam where it would remain fortified from all kinds of interference from outside. And they have considered it their religious duty to save these fortresses from external aggression. However, the irony of the situation is that the kind of interpretations and comments regarding Islam emanating currently from these institutions run counter to both the Qur'an and rational thinking. If Islam is left entirely in the hands of these ill-informed and ill-advised ulema, then the fear looms large that they, like the Jewish Rabbi, would turn it into a complex and convoluted phenomenon, beyond the reach or accessibility of common Muslims.

Islam did not allow any group of ulema or any religious faction or clergy to claim leadership in religious or spiritual affairs. The venerable ulema know it very well that the position of leadership that they have occupied on the pretext of the verse, *fas'alu ahl al-zikr*, is untenable in the light of the above Qur'anic verse. It is regrettable that they have alienated the verse from its original meaning and context, and are using it to justify the continuance of their self-styled leadership in matters of religion. The religious scholars who have issued the edict that Imrana has ceased to be the wife of her husband, and that she has become *haram* to him, felt it necessary to adduce arguments from such books as *Fatawa Al-Hindiya*, *Radd Al-Mukhtar* and *Bahr Al-Ra'iq*. It would have

been far better if they chose to refer themselves to the Book of God and read the verse in its proper context, and not depend on books written by human beings which are riddled with contradictions. If they did so, they would have come to know of the mistakes committed by the Hanafite jurists while expressing their views on the issue. This is as far as Islamic jurisprudence is concerned and the information contained in the corpus. Apart from jurisprudence, if these gentlemen had exercised their intellect and common sense, they would have understood that the Book that unequivocally asserts that everyone will get his deserts, where verses such as - كل نفس بما - remind us again and again that every individual will be responsible for his own actions, can never approve of the view that the son should be punished for his father's action, to the extent that his entire family life falls into disarray. The view expressed by the jurists that having committed adultery with her father-in-law, the woman has become like a mother to her husband, points to the kind of specious arguments and hair splitting for which the Jewish Rabbis were famous. It is a matter of great regret that we have left even the Jews religious scholars far behind in this regard. Like them (Jews scholars), our religious scholars too, show little inclination to reflect on the Divine Words on their own and rely more on the statements and interpretations of their predecessors for resolving any issue. Well, how can those who style themselves as inveterate Hanafites deviate from the views of Abu Hanifa! Of course, it is quite possible for them to ignore the just scheme of things enjoined upon us by the Qur'an or the simple and transparent meaning of a Qur'anic verse simply because the Hanafite scholars of a by-gone era read and understood it differently.

As for the moderate Islamic scholars, their attitude is also noteworthy. When they find the finer points of Hanafite jurisprudence and the views of the predecessors coming in the

way of resolving an issue, to get out of the impasse they take recourse to either the Shafei, or the Maleki or the Hambali jurisprudence. They also seem to lack courage to seek direct guidance from the Book of God. In the Imrana affair, some moderate Islamic scholars have tried to take recourse to the Shafei'ite jurisprudence and expressed the view that an impermissible (*haram*) act cannot abrogate a permissible (*halal*) act (in the present case, a relationship). Thus, even after becoming the victim of her father-in-law's sexual lust, Imrana's relationship with her husband would remain intact. Ostensibly, this seems to be a moderate view based on reason and common sense, but even this view too takes its sustenance from the opinions of earlier scholars, and does not present the true picture of Islam in the light of the Qur'an.

I maintain the view that the fundamental cause for the deviation from Islam and the consequent decline of the Muslim community is that we have built a hedge of interpretive literature around the Qur'an. We do not allow the Qur'an to play a decisive role. On the contrary, when faced with an issue, we immediately begin to look for the views of the jurists belonging to our sect. As for those issues that do not find mention in these books, it is customary for us to condemn anything new, till the time this new thing becomes an inalienable part of our life and takes us firmly in its grip. From the use of loudspeaker to the slaughter of animals and birds by machine, our religious scholars declared all of them to be impermissible in the beginning, but gradually this impermissible apparatus became such a favourite with them that no *maulvi* likes to address his audience without using microphone. The truth of the matter is – Allah has not given human beings the right to declare things permissible or impermissible. All actions falling under these categories have been clearly defined in the Qur'an. This is why we must give up the notion that the right to interpret or explicate Islam has been given

to any particular class or group of people. To speak the truth, Islam came to do away with this class of people who stand between human beings and God. All the Prophets that came to the world declared that their mission on earth was to establish direct connection between Allah and His creation. No church or group of *maulvis* should be allowed to stand in between. To leave aside the Book of Allah and look for guidance from the ulema, and scour the books of ancient jurists for their statements and views, is an act greatly disliked by Allah. The Qur'an characterises such an act as follows:

﴿ اتَّخَذُوا أَحْبَارَهُمْ وَرُهَبَانَهُمْ أَرْبَابًا مِّن دُونِ اللَّهِ ﴾ (التوبة: 31)

The thoughtful among the Muslims must realise that Allah revealed the Qur'an on the last Prophet, which is not subject to the interpretation of the four principal jurists. The ancient jurists were also human beings like us, liable to error. We are not bound to carry on the burden of the mistakes committed by them on our weak shoulders. For us, our own errors of omission and commission are enough. Moreover, why only the books handed down by the four principal jurists are consulted on a controversial issue? From Abu Hanifa to Hambal, at least thirty nine imams find mention in the books of history, and all of them enjoyed more or less equal status as far as their learning and erudition was concerned. The books left by most of them have been lost to oblivion, and this loss has not resulted in any inadequacy in understanding the Faith. Then, will people's understanding of the Faith remain incomplete without the writings of the four imams? This is a question that thinking Muslims must address themselves to. It should also be made clear that the four imams did not come to earth as the representative of Allah, nor does the Qur'an exhort us to follow anyone in Toto after the demise of the Prophet. Those who have complaints against the Muslim Personal Law Board or *darul-Iftah* of Deoband

for not responding to the Imrana affair in a commonsensical way, and with a sense of fairness and justice, and those who are incensed by the fact that our religious institutions that have been established to understand and teach the Qur'an, do not display the courage to access the Qur'an directly, should realise the fact that the way the system under which they have been taught and trained did not accord the same central position to the Qur'an that we expect from it. If you take a look at the syllabi of Islamic seminaries it will tell you how many hours are devoted to the study of the Qur'an, and how much of it is included in the syllabi. It can be said that other subjects (apart from the Qur'an) that are taught do help in a better understanding of the Qur'an. If it is true, and if the ancient social sciences can help us in understanding the Qur'an better, then why the older generation of Muslim scholars are bent upon excluding the new social sciences from the syllabi?

Will Imrana get justice through the understanding of jurisprudence by the traditional Muslim scholars or through the system of criminal justice administered by the state? This is certainly an important question that will engage people's attention. A more vital aspect of the episode, however, is the big question mark it has raised about the adequacy of the muftis and the Qur'anic understanding of our ulema. Those who, according to the Hanafite view, want to rob Imrana of her husband because of the crime committed by her father-in-law, and those who characterise this view of jurisprudence as the Divine *shariah* and align it to the rights of Muslims given under personal law, are resigned to the idea of putting the raping father-in-law under the criminal justice system administered by the state because the Islamic law is not operative here, and hence he cannot be stoned to death. What sort of strange interpretation of law is this that while you insist so much to impose the *shariah* on one party that you make it out to be a question of Faith and *iman*, but you allow

the other party to escape the injunction of *shariah* on the plea that Islamic law cannot be implemented here. It is another matter that just as efforts are being made to abrogate Imrana's marriage on non-Qur'anic bases, in the same way the proposed stoning of death of the father-in-law is also anti-Qur'anic, because the punishment for a rapist is caning and not stoning to death, as stipulated in the *Surah Noor*. But those who accord greater importance to the statements and sayings of jurists than the Qur'an will not desist from offering the hypothesis that that *ayah rajm* was present in the Qur'an, which was either lost or taken away, but its injunction (*hukm*) still remains. It is a matter of regret that those who say such things do not realise how audaciously they are violating the sanctity of the Qur'an.

As long as the thinking Muslims do not make any organised effort to wrest the right to explain and interpret Islam from the muftis with half-baked knowledge of the Qur'an and the dim-witted ulema, no improvement in the situation can be expected. Instead of depending on a faction of ulema, Muslims should rely on the Qur'an. Moreover, it should be imprinted on the mind and heart of common Muslims that in Islam there is neither any scope for primacy for a particular section of the ulema, nor is there any validity of the notion of spiritual leadership by any faction. As long as this does not happen it will be possible for the enemies of Islam to cast aspersions on it and draw a ludicrous picture of it. Muslims of India should realise by now that it is not advisable to depend on hospices or *madarsas* for the protection of the Faith. They should themselves come forward and hold Allah's Book in their own hands, and hold on to it forever.

Muslim reformers of today must not lose sight of the fact that the Qur'an is not a mere scripture in the Christen sense of the term and hence cannot be handled just like any other scripture. Here each word is definite and is preserved in the original language, the way it was sent down to the prophet Mohamed, in verbatim. Reforming Islam from within simply amounts to purging the human interpretative elements in it and not in any case the intent itself.

the expulsion of the Red Army from Afghanistan followed by the dismantlement of the 'Evil Empire' and the miraculous re-emergence of Central Asian Muslim states were yet other factors that contributed to our delusion. Amidst hectic political developments we conveniently ignored the fact that our ideological candor had waned, that our return to the seat of authority and guidance would be a mere dream without mending our ideological fabric, and without recapturing the essence of revelation. Even those who considered it necessary to revive the Ummah on religious grounds were caught up in outer manifestations or at most ended in the implementation of a *fiqhi* worldview of the bygone days. Neither the alien Common Wealth model, nor a *fiqhi* Islam can be a substitute for divine revelation that alone has the potential to transform the Ummah into one unit, the *bunyanum marsoos*, and the vanguard for the unity of mankind. The *fiqhi* mind is essentially divisive. It likens to send more people out of the Islamic fold than welcoming them inside it. The full-scale display of *fiqhi* Islam, or fatawaic thinking, not only ground the Islamic awakening to a halt, it also pushed us to a head-on collision with other faith groups and civilizational models. The newly founded Islamic centers in western cities remained at best the garrisons of sectarian strife, representing more of the founding sect than the universal message of Islam. The broad based Qur'anic dicta of *kalimatun sawaaen* for forging alliance with other like-minded nations found little support from the predisposed sectarian thinking. The Muslim presence in the West had offered us a unique opportunity to take the 'revelation-revolution' to western homes. But this wonderful opportunity was conveniently lost amidst a plethora of hairsplitting *fiqhi* questions aimed at establishing cultural islands of traditional Islam. The *fiqhi* mind has now brought us to such a pass that despite our intense romantic hankering for the revival of the House of Islam we find ourselves trapped in a false dawn.

## Living through an Uncreative Tension

Having lost much of their confidence and self-esteem in post-9/11 situation the Muslims world over are living through an uncreative tension and idly though anxiously waiting for a Messiah. It is high time to find out if there is any ideological basis for the emergence of a future Messiah or such expectations are only misplaced visions of the future. Whether it is the arrival of Mahdi or the emergence of Messiah, whether it is the wait for the *Imam Ghaib* or the quest for the future *mujaddid*, the fact remains that they run counter to the concept of the finality of prophethood. The one who had to come had already come. No one will come after him. The rapport between the earth and the heavens has severed for all times. Now whatever needs be done should be done by his followers for whom there is the promise of (إنا له لحافظون) through the Protected Book and that is about all.

However, the irony is that even in the minds of great and known people the idea of a new prophet has got such strong hold that serious scholarly criticism and continuous denial for

centuries have not been able to rid them of their self-invented notions. The Holy Qur'an claims to be a book of complete guidance. In the absence of the Prophet its existence is enough to keep people on the straight. There is enough material here to remove internal aberrations and offer correctives to misguided attitudes. This promise of vice regency enjoined upon by the Holy Qur'an still stands valid, with all its attendant conditions, for the Muslim community. But, for us who have become accustomed to an easy life and have caught the disease of ancestor worship, it has become a difficult task to understand directly this heavenly message and accept this invitation. On principle we accept the fact that the door of prophethood has been closed, but in practice, we are still waiting for the appearance of a false prophet. Those scholars belonging to *Ahl-e Sunnah wal-Jama'h* who declare the notion of *Imam Ghaib* or the emergence of Mahdi and Messiah as running counter to the Islamic faith still offer justification for the coming of a *mujaddid*, and here also there is scope for a larger-than-life-size leader. So much so that even a person like Abul Ala Maududi who applies very rigorous standard for the status of a leader, cannot rest content without declaring the good tidings of the arrival of a perfect *mujaddid*. According to him, 'The position of a perfect *mujaddid* is still vacant. But the mind wishes, nature requires and changing circumstances of our life demand that such a leader be born. He may be born now, or several thousand years hence. He will be called Imam Mahdi, about whom clearer indications can be found in the saying of the Prophet'. (Abul Ala Maududi, *Tajdeed wa Ahya-e Deen*, p. 49).

In sum, an elaborate discipline of future forecasts has come into being amongst us on the basis of detailed indications about *Imam Ghaib*, the promised Messiah and the future *mujaddid* that have found place in popular compilations. Those who have tried to investigate the authenticity of such traditions have reached the

conclusion that such stories and tales are mere fabrications, and do not have even the remotest connection with the Prophet. We think that this entire discipline of future forecasts has been borrowed from the Judaic sources, the non-Arab culture of the Abbasid period had contributed significantly to give it flesh and blood and take flights of fancy. Suffice it to say here that the famed tradition about *mujaddid* that has become part of our common knowledge, the reference to which is found in *Abu Dawood*, cannot be considered correct even on the basis of text, quite aside from the question of its authenticity. The actual words of the tradition are purported to be as follows: عن ابي هريرة فيما أعلم عن رسول الله إن الله يبعث في أمتي على رأس كل مائة من يجدد لها دينها. (ابوداؤد كتاب الملاحم) According to the scholars of tradition, this *hadith* is extremely feeble, according to the parameters of testing that take into account the profile of the transmitters (*rijal*). 'There are many such traditions about whose authenticity objections have been raised, but events seemed to have verified them. The same is true of this *hadith*, and the history of Islam is witness to its truth.' (Maulana Shah Syed Sulaiman Nadvi, in *Muqaddama Deen Tajdeed-e Kamil* by Abdul Bari, Lucknow, 1956).

Just this one *hadith* of doubtful provenance has kept the entire Muslim community involved in debates and disputes as to who can be called a real *mujaddid*, and who can be given the status of a perfect *mujaddid*. Since the conventional scholars of traditions themselves have disagreement about the authenticity of this *hadith*, we would not launch here into a debate about 'rijal' and content ourselves with an analysis of the text only.

The statement that Allah would send a *mujaddid* in each century cannot be a saying of the Prophet for this simple reason alone that the concept of the Hijri Era/ century had not come into vogue during his period. The counting of the calendar year from the time of Hijra was instituted by Caliph Omer. That is why those who, after finding Omer bin Abdul Aziz ensconced in the seat of caliphate at the end of the first century Hijra, provide

justification for the reliability of this *hadith*, should keep this in mind. Another point which is even more significant than this is – how will the *mujaddid* be identified in each century? There are no instructions regarding this. In the absence of any clear instructions about the identity of such a significant leader, how can people benefit from his emergence? This *hadith* has got profound scholars of traditions in a bind – who should be regarded the *mujaddid* of which century? It is said that in this respect the first initiative was taken by Imam Ahmad bin Hambal who had declared Omar bin Abdul Aziz (d.101 AH) as the *mujaddid* of the first century Hijra, and Imam Shafei' (d. 204 AH) as the *mujaddid* of the second century Hijra. After that each scholar or man of letters appointed his own panel of *mujaddids* according to his own insight and preference. It is said that Abul Hasan Ash'ari is the *mujaddid* of the third century, Imam Al-Haramain Javini is the *mujaddid* of the fourth century and Ghazali that of the fifth century. Some even considered it important to include their own names into the list as they identified the *mujaddids* of the past centuries. Jalaluddin Sayuti, after properly naming the *mujaddids* of the past eight centuries as Omar bin Abdul Aziz, Imam Shafei', Hafiz Ibn-e Shoraih, Imaam Baqelani, Imam Ghazali, Imam Razi, Ibn-e Daqeeq al-Eid, Imam Bilqini, listed his own name for the august position of the *mujaddid* of the ninth century. But this century has also Imam Sakhawi whose claim for this position still holds. It is said that as Sayuti belonged to the Shafei School, he crammed the list with the names of those belonging to this school. In India, Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi, who has attained the status of Great Mujaddid of the second millennium, insists on the fact that what to speak of a hundred, there may be even a thousand with their own individual status. Who will decide on such an important issue? And who would be considered to be the *mujaddid* of the time? This is an issue on which debates have been going on in the community for

about twelve centuries. As we pointed out, some are not ready to accept anyone as the perfect *mujaddid*. According to them, a perfect *mujaddid* is yet to come. Ahmad Sirhindi was accorded the epithet of *mujaddid* by Abdul Kalim Sialkoti, which gradually became a part of his name. When Ashraf Ali Thanavi, the famed Dewbandi scholar of the Indian subcontinent, was asked whether he considers him as the *mujaddid* of the period, he said: 'I too feel so, but nothing more than that. Others also should not say anything with certainty. There are possibilities, but no one can be absolutely sure about any *mujaddid*'.

(Abdul Bari, *Tajdeed Deen-e Kamil*, p.25)

It is a pity that our leaders and pathfinders have remained overwrought over something so insubstantial, in fact a non-issue, so that some insist on the advent of a perfect *mujaddid* while some suffers under the delusion that the imam supposed to arrive from the world of Unseen could be his own self. Because in the study of history and evaluating the inheritance of our ancestors, an attitude of reverence rather than a critical stance has been preferred, once some wrong notion crept into the books of the ancestors through some doubtful/ wrong sources, it went in perpetuity and no one tried to rectify the error. Rather it gathered force with the passage of time. We think that the first echo about this tradition was heard during the period of Mamun who headed the Muslim world at the end of the second century Hijra. It does not seem surprising that such traditions were brought to the fore at the time because of political considerations. The existence of a towering figure like Omar bin Abdul Aziz at the beginning of the century could have actuated Mamun and his supporters to acquire legitimacy through this tradition. Imam Ahmad bin Hambal who was known for his anti-establishment stance in this period named Imam Shafei as the *mujaddid* of the second century, after Omer bin Abdul Aziz. This can be seen as an effort to deprive Mamun of the advantages that he could derive from taking recourse to the above tradition.

About Jesus, the Holy Qur'an very clearly uses the word "متوفيك" (Qur'an, 3:55). In this universe everyone is fated to die. "كل نفس ذائقة الموت" is, in fact, a declaration of this reality. Jesus was one of Allah's great prophets who had been sent to the Israelites to breathe a new life of spirituality in them. It is regrettable that when the community of the Israelites who had been waiting for a messiah for a long period was blessed with such an invaluable gift, rather than seeking guidance from him and deriving benefit from his presence, they made his life and the lives of his companions miserable. As a matter of fact, according to their own understanding of facts, they have crucified him.

The Holy Qur'an does not provide many details about the death of Jesus. The word "رافعك" led many to the wrong belief that Jesus was lifted to the heavens when he was still alive, and that is why his reappearance became a common belief among people. Some of our commentators have been rather simplistic in using the Judaic sources, as a result of which some Judaic and Christian beliefs and notions have crept into our belief system. According to our view, the notion of Jesus' reappearance has been borrowed from external sources. There is no internal evidence in the Holy Qur'an to support this, nor can it be argued on the basis of Qur'anic evidence. Those who tried to make space for Jesus' reappearance in the Islamic view of life think that he would appear as a follower of Prophet Muhammad, and his job would be the restoration and protection of the Mohammedan *Shariah*.

Some sources have it that Messiah's appearance would take place in Damascus towards the east near some white minaret. He would be dressed in a saffron robe, similar to the ones the Egyptians wear. And he would come with his hands on the arms of angels on either side. Water would drip down from his hair as though he had just come out of a bath. Some other sources have it that he would marry and have children, and he would die after 40 years in Medina. Some people have even recorded that he would

be buried beside Caliph Omar. According to Ibn Abi Wasil, the awaited imam of the Shiites, i.e., the Great Messiah (*Maseehul Masaih*) is none other than him. Some mystics do not believe in the appearance of either Mahdi or Messiah. We feel that all such beliefs that have gained roots in the common mind have, in fact, been borrowed from Christian sources. However, having been repeated time out of count they have become part of common knowledge. The second and the most important reason is that those who want to keep the Muslim community in their current state of decline desire it earnestly that rather than trying to identify our aberrations from Islamic thought we should sit idle, waiting for the promised Messiah.

The *Muatta* of Imam Malik, regarded as the most reliable collection of traditions because of its proximity to the Prophet's period does not contain any indications regarding the coming of the Messiah, although *Bukhari* contains two references to it. But it also contains reference to Jesus' death. The first hadith in this regard has been recorded in the chapter 'Emergence of Isa Alaihis Salatu Wassalam':

حدثنا محمد بن بشار حدثنا غندر حدثنا شعبة عن قتادة. وقال لي خليفة: حدثنا يزيد بن زريع حدثنا سعيد عن قتادة عن ابي العالية ابن عم نبيكم - يعني ابن عباس رضي الله عنهما - عن النبي قال: "رأيت ليلة أُسري بي موسى رجلاً آدم طوالاً جعداً كأنه من رجال شنوءة، ورأيت عيسى رجلاً مربوعاً، مربوع الخلق الى الحمرة والبياض، سبط الرأس، ورأيت مالكا خازن النار، والدجال في آيات أراهن الله اياه، فلا تكن في مرية من لقائه. قال أنس و أبو بكر عن النبي: تحرس الملائكة المدينة من الدجال.

(Quoted in *Fatahul Bari* p.362; *Kitab Bada Al-Khalq*, vol.6, Cairo, 1988).

The second *hadith* is regarding the appearance of Dajjal which can be found in *Kitab Al-fitan* as follows:

عن عبد الله ابن عمر أن رسول الله قال: بينا أنا نائم أطوف بالكعبة فإذا رجل آدم سبط الشعر ينطف - أو يهراق - رأسه ماء، قلت من هذا؟ قالوا: ابن مريم، ثم ذهبت ألتفت فإذا رجلٌ جسيمٌ أحمر جعد الرأس أعور العين كان عينه عنبه طافية، قالوا: هذا الدجال، أقرب الناس به شبهاً ابن قطن رجل من خزاعة.

(Quoted in *Fatahul Bari*, p.97, vol.13.)

However, at none of the above two places can one find any mention of the coming of Messiah, nor any mention of the fact that Dajjal would be killed by him. There is only the reference to a dream of the Prophet in which he saw Jesus. The scholars of traditions have declared these two *hadiths* 'feeble' on the basis of testing (*rijal*). A detailed discussion regarding this issue can be found in Allama Tamanna Imadi's *Intizar-e Mahdi wa Masih* (Waiting for Mahdi and Messaiah). He has established on the basis of historical evidence the sociological motivation for such *hadiths* and why they cannot be considered as reliable.

In this regard a *hadith* has been recorded through Amr bin Aas in *Sahih Muslim*; another *hadith* of this kind has also been recorded in *Sahih Muslim* through Jabir bin Abdullah. Apart from these, another *hadith* of this group can be found in *Abu Dawood* through Abu Sariha Huzaifa bin Osaid. *Tirmizi* and *Ibn Maja* are also not devoid of this kind of traditions. If one looks at the narrators/ transmitters of all these *hadiths* collectively one realises that despite their long line of narration and recording, they are limited in scope, and among their narrators there are those whom scholars of traditions do not regard as reliable.

If Muslims have taken recourse to waiting for a Messiah in their era of decline, one of its significant causes is the psychology engendered by continuous backwardness. Those who were unnerved by civil wars among Muslims were compelled to make compromises with major aberrations from Islamic ways, to ensure unity among Muslims. They had also witnessed, despite the continuous opposition of great scholars and men of wisdom, the failure of the experiment to bring the caliphate back to the objective of prophethood. For them, to believe in an extraordinary and charismatic figure was not difficult, psychologically. Particularly when such a notion was presented, draped in the robe of the Book and the Sunnah. Another reason for this was that there was enough material in the Judaic and

Christian traditions to impart respectability to such a view. In the initial periods, the Judaic tradition had gained the status of an objective and positive additional source. That is why when the resurrection of Christ was presented in the perspective of time, very few people realized the fallacy in such a notion. Moreover, apart from the people of the Book, the idea of Messiah was also available in the Indo-Iranian sources. Thus, those people from the non-Arab tradition who had embraced Islam, did not find anything strange in such a notion. We have already referred to the second coming of Messiah in the Christian sources. Matthew contains vivid description of the appearance of Messiah from the clouds. It is also said that before his emergence angels would be sent around the world to herald his arrival, so that his adherents can gather from everywhere on that occasion. Such indications can also be seen in Mark 13/24 and Luke 21/25. According to the Jews, the name of the newly arrived would be Emmanuel. As per Daniel's dream, he would also appear from the clouds, and after his arrival the Jews would get back their lost glory. For centuries, the Jews had been waiting for a combative and warlike Messiah who would release them from the bondage of the Romans. Though things on the ground have changed now, the Jews have not yet got over their obsession with Messiah. Among the Zoroastrians, Sao Shyant is a similar character who would be sent to the materialist world to revive spiritual life, and who would lead a global mission, unlike the local mission of Zaratushtra (Zoroaster). A similar notion is found among the Hindus with reference to Krishna. It is clear from *Bhagwad Gita* 4/78 and *Vishnu Puran* 4/24 that when the world would be filled with sins and oppression, then Krishna would reincarnate himself in a new avatar.

We feel that the popular interest about the emergence of Messiah need be understood in this perspective. Ibn Hazm has expressed the view in *Al-Milal wa Al-Nahal* that the community

that is disgraced because of its reprehensible actions waits longingly and wishfully for the emergence of a figure that would remove their distress, and delude themselves with this thought. Such communities sit idle and expect the Messiah to take them out of the quagmire of their disgraceful state. The belief among the Christians about the emergence of Messiah in the final era from the clouds, or the belief among the Shiites about the emergence of the twelfth imam hinges on this despair. In the seventeenth century the emergence of Sabbatai Zevi among the Israelites had created such a commotion as a result of which the entire Judaic world was thrown into the abyss of despair once again.

In Muslim thought the notions of the return of Messiah, the emergence of Mahdi or the arrival of the *mujaddid* have led to the prevalence of non-Qur'anic and unnatural beliefs that had unseemly consequences. These consequences were manifested in distorted views and thoughts of people. In the earlier years, the alleged emergence of Mahdi in Sudan, and in India the existence of believers in Mahdi are witness to the fact that bizarre thoughts can lead our caravan to such a blind alley that it will find no way out of it. As long as the believers do not get rid of such non-Qur'anic beliefs, the appearance of false Messiahs and self-styled Mahdis amongst us will go unabated.

Caught in the imperial ambitions of Bush-Blair nexus, today Muslims are vulnerable to any label that one would like to throw upon them. Having noticed that those fighting a survival battle around the world are none other but Muslims, many among us ask if Islam is only another name for anarchy or mindless terrorism. Even those actively busy in the survival struggle have strong doubts if this strategy can eventually take us to the glory of a just world order, the mission statement of Islam. The *fiqhi* mind, trained to think in black and white, reminiscent of the social milieu of the Abbasid era, fails to realize the complexity of the new situation and its far-reaching impact on the Muslim psyche. It is split not only into four parallel perceptions but also into innumerable conflicting reportage of mere historical import. Unless this psyche goes back to the pristine purity of revelation it can only add to our woes by monopolizing its traditional perception as the only authentic version. If in the past Shia-Sunni dispute and Hanfi-Shafei bloody strife caused the fall of the Abbasid Empire, today too, our internal strife is a constant source of hope for our enemies. Our ulema are so rigidly grooved in sectarian terms that for them a universal identity of Islam without a sectarian moorings is almost inconceivable. The Abrahamic model of Muslim *haneef* is a thing of the past.

Our dismissal cannot be taken as a mere internal issue. It has put the entire human history into a crabbed mode. A frank, honest and passionate discussion on the causes of our decline is then the need of the hour. Instead of relying on the wisdom of the dead souls or mindlessly quoting from this scholar or that seer, the time has come to apply our own minds, to look into the Qur'an for a fresh guidance in our milieu. Some might consider it abhorring or even a blasphemy to approach the Qur'an afresh, without solely relying on the great minds of the past. But those aware of the Prophet's primary mission, so explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an, to liberate human mind from all kinds of colonial

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In later centuries of Islam, the very concept of knowledge witnessed radical transformation. The *Ilm Sharei*, knowledge of religious sciences, which emerged mostly during the Abbasid Baghdad, attained prominence and a cloak of holiness surrounded those who mastered this knowledge. Since then, the Muslim world was never able to attain a unified vision of knowledge. The Qur'anic definition of a scholar took a back seat as the new *Ahbar* of Islam placed themselves on the high pedestal of *Ahl-adh-dhikr*, ever willing to provide an answer to any question under the sky.

## Digression from *Iqra*

**T**he much publicized notion that the Prophet Mohammed was an unlettered person had a far-reaching impact on the Muslim mind. It not only discouraged scientific enquiry among Muslims, in some Sufi circles, it even led to eulogizing ignorance. In later centuries of Islam, the very concept of knowledge witnessed radical transformation. The *Ilm Sharei*, knowledge of religious sciences, that emerged mostly during the Abbasid Baghdad, attained prominence and a cloak of holiness surrounded those who mastered this knowledge. Since then, the Muslim world was never able to attain a unified vision of knowledge. The Qur'anic definition of a scholar took a back seat as the new *Ahbar* of Islam placed themselves on the high pedestal of *Ahl-adh-dhikr*, ever willing to provide an answer to any question under the sky. At the root of the crises lay the common misconception that the prophet whom we as Muslims were supposed to emulate had nothing to do with the tradition of reading and writing, the basic tool of rational enquiry. This misconception about a prophet of a pen-and-paper-age was mainly responsible for keeping the Muslim world at bay from its own divinely ordained *Iqra* tradition.

If the Prophet can be proved to be alienated from pen and paper, then oral transmission remains the only means for disseminating the Qur'anic message. Human memory, however retentive and powerful it may be, is always liable to error. That is why it would not have been considered desirable to depend on only oral retention for the preservation of a profound blessing like the Qur'an. We feel that for an individual of the Prophet's stature, it is not only insulting to be branded as illiterate, but also such a notion runs counter to the Qur'anic concept where it has been asserted that, among the written books, the Prophet is capable of reading the Qur'an and writing the verses down:

﴿ وَمَا كُنْتَ تَتْلُوا مِنْ قَبْلِهِ مِنْ كِتَابٍ وَلَا تَخُطُّهُ بِيَمِينِكَ ﴾ (العنكبوت: 48)

i.e. 'before attaining Prophethood you were not capable of reading nor could you write anything with your own hand'. The misconception that the Prophet was illiterate spread because of the wrong interpretation of the word 'ummi', that has been generally taken by scholars and exegetes to mean illiterate. As a matter of fact, on several occasions in the Qur'an the word 'umm' points to '*ummul qura*', a reference to Makkah. Referring to the Israelites, the Qur'an states that they are untrustworthy, they do not return what is kept in their custody; it also states about the polytheists of Mecca that - ليس علينا في الأميين سبيل (Qur'an, 3:75). Referring to the Prophet, the Qur'an states in surah Jum'a:

﴿ هُوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي الْأُمِّيِّينَ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ يَتْلُوا عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ

الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ ﴾ (الجمعة: 2)

It is Allah who appointed a Prophet among the inhabitants of Mecca who reads out verses of Allah to them. If the Prophet of the Makkahns were illiterate, how could he read out verses to them? At another place it is stated: وقل للذين أوتوا الكتاب والاميين ءاسلمتم (Qur'an, 3: 20), i.e. 'ask those who have been given the Book and those who live in Makkah whether they accept Islam?' In this

context, the unlettered people that are being referred to along with the people of the Book certainly points to the fact that the people of the Book address others, i.e., those Arabs who were not among the people of the Book, particularly the descendants of Ishmael, as *ummi*. It does not imply that the persons so addressed are illiterate, but that they do not have the honour of being included among the people of the Book. It is historically true that the people of the Book considered themselves superior to the Arab polytheists who had no sacred book given to them. Even if one extends the meaning of the word *ummi* it might be taken to mean those people whose cultural and historical inheritance is devoid of any direction from a Divine Text. But it is surprising that for a Guide to humanity about whose capability of reading and writing the Qur'an makes categorical pronouncements has been rendered illiterate by our exegetes.

﴿الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الرَّسُولَ النَّبِيَّ الْأُمِّيَّ الَّذِي يَجِدُونَهُ مَكْتُوبًا عِنْدَهُمْ فِي التَّوْرَةِ وَالْإِنْجِيلِ﴾ (الأعراف: 157)

or

﴿فَعَامِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ النَّبِيِّ الْأُمِّيِّ الَّذِي يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ﴾ (الأعراف: 158)

On all such occasions, Allah appreciates the Prophet and asserts his purity, addresses him as 'Al-nabi al-ummi'. But the translators and commentators have always taken the word to mean illiterate, and they considered it a great compliment for the Prophet. This notion had unintended consequences for the Prophet's followers some of whom began to think that if the Prophet himself was illiterate, then illiteracy was no evil, but could even be a blessing and an honour. When Allah addresses the Prophet as *al-nabi al-ummi* with the objective of enhancing his honour, how could anyone say that illiteracy was an evil? As a matter of fact, as evident from historical facts, employing the prisoners of war in the battle of Badr to teach the children of Medina as a penalty is

by itself demonstrative of the fact that reading and writing were highly valued among the followers of the Prophet. But those who insisted on presenting the Prophet as illiterate found it easy to project the view that for the Prophet's acolytes illiteracy was a virtue and that knowledge is a 'great veil' (*hijab-e-akbar*). We feel that the notion that the Prophet was illiterate is the handiwork of exegetical and interpretive literature in Islam.

One tradition recorded by Bukhari from Aswad bin Qais Al-Nahkei seems to have played a key role in transforming 'al-nabi al-ummi' to the 'illiterate Prophet'. It runs as follows: *انا امة أمية لا نكتب ولا نحسب الشهر هكذا وهكذا وعقد الأيام في الثالثة والشهر هكذا* This tradition, available through different sources, had Aswad bin Qais Al-Nakhei as its original reporter who recorded it with reference to Amr bin Sa'id and Abdullah bin Omer. The image of the Prophet projected by this tradition is that of a person who was illiterate and had no knowledge of the three R's, and a member of a community that was ignorant and illiterate, whose members counted the days of the month on their fingers. This is the image that has effectively transformed *al-nabi al-ummi* to the 'illiterate Prophet'. Firstly, this tradition has been reported by a person who is known to have been extremely unreliable, and who had a penchant for creating discord and disputes. It is said that Aswad bin Qais Al-Nakhei was at the vanguard of those who had come from Kufa to participate in the uprising against Othman. This is as far as the reputation of the transmitter is concerned. Secondly, to characterise the community of the Prophet as illiterate is a notion that flies directly in the face of historical facts and the assertions of the Qur'an. On the one hand, this tradition states that the Prophet did not know how to count even up to 30, and that even the entire community of Bani Ismail counted the days of the month on their fingers. On the other hand, in the Qur'an the references to numbers from one to one hundred thousand, and in the *ayah warasat* (verses on Inheritance) the occurrence of words such as 'half', 'one third', 'one fourth' 'one

fifth' etc. point to the fact that not only the Prophet but also the community to which he belonged were both quite familiar with the knowledge of numbers. Otherwise, how a Prophet who did not have the knowledge of the primary numbers could have discharged the responsibility of resolving complex computation? As to the question whether members of the Quraish tribe were illiterate, numerous arguments can be adduced to prove conclusively that they were not. The references to their sophisticated taste in poetry, their familiarity with calligraphy, the seven celebrated hangings (*sab'a muallaqat*) on the walls of Ka'ba, the prisoners of war teaching the children of Medina, the instructions to believers in the Qur'an to write down business transactions for the sake of clarity, the written treaty between the Prophet when he entered the city and the people of Medina, and many other such instances falsify the claim made by this tradition. Interpreting *ummi* as 'illiterate' is a fabrication of the enemies of Islam. It cannot be corroborated by the internal evidence contained in the Qur'an and the authentic history of the period.



Today the entire Muslim world is infested with pre-Islamic superstitions regarding amulets, mystical charts and a host of irrational beliefs about the supposed power of these amulets that one often encounters, in some way or the other, in most Muslim homes. And this has brought us to an age of *Jaheliyyah* once again, conditioning our minds to think not in terms of reason but clinging to the paradigm of superstitions, and a set of unfounded and irrational belief system.

## Clinging to False Hopes

**T**he dismissal of the Muslim nation from world leadership and her subsequent decline since then have made the common Muslim cling to false hopes, at times amounting to Shirk. Today the entire Muslim world is infested with pre-Islamic superstitions regarding amulets, mystical charts and a host of irrational beliefs about the supposed power of these amulets that one often encounters, in some way or the other, in most Muslim homes. These charts, claiming their roots in the Qur'an have in fact suspended the very function of the Qur'an, to approach it as a book of guidance. And this has brought us to an age of Jaheliyyah once again, conditioning our minds to think not in terms of reason but clinging to the paradigm of superstitions, and a set of unfounded and irrational belief system.

We feel that the entire school comprising Qur'anic signs, amulets and charms came up in Islam under the direct impact of Judaism. The notion that the esoteric meaning of the Torah can be accessed if the Hebrew alphabets are arranged in a particular way was fairly widespread. Geometric figures have also hidden powers, provided one knows the art of arranging them. Sephiroth (numerical emanations) is, in fact, a description of God's

multifarious qualities. As God is neither male nor female, it encompasses both the forms. God is the root number where all other numbers are hidden. All the numbers between one and ten were employed in the creation of Adam of innocence, before he experienced fall. The Kabala tells us that the world created before the creation of the heavenly Adam could not survive because it lacked some sort of numerical balance.

According to its Sufi commentators, the Torah is an embodiment of God's female form that should be understood at four levels of meaning: peshat (literal), remezi (symbolical), derash (allegorical), and sod (mystical). In the Genesis, the description of the creation of the universe is understood by the mystics in such a way as though God has created the world with the help of words. According to this way of thinking, the whole business of creation was conducted with the help of three words: alif/air, meem/water, and sheen/fire. In the breathing of human beings and in the veins of the universe, these three letters create their miracles. This view claims that concentration and reflection on these three basic letters establishes the rapport of a human being with his Creator through a spiritual bond. Instead of taking them simply as receptacles of some meaning they should be taken as a tool to merge with the Almighty, to lose one's identity in His identity. The numerical value attached to each Aramaic letter and its magical power led the Jews to the wrong belief that with the help of the magical powers possessed by these letters they would not only be able to come closer to God, but also after knowing the secrets of their power in different combinations, they would themselves be able to simulate God's experience.

Like his predecessor, Rabbi Akiva, Ibrahim Abul Afiya says the following about this spiritual experience:

'After deep concentration and profound reflection on the letters, you would feel as though the hair on your head had stood on their ends... there is vibration in your blood .. and your whole

body is shaking ... your limbs are getting numb and ... you would feel as though some external soul has entered your body ... that would strengthen you from inside and that would spread through your veins ... it is like a scented perfume that would envelop you from head to toe'.

(Abraham Abulfia, *Sefer ha-Tzeruf*, tr. Aryeh Kaplan, Bibliotheque Nationale ms. No. 774, and Jewish Theological Seminary ms. No. 1887, Quoted in Perle Besserman, *The Shambhala Guide to Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism*, Massachusetts 1997, p.37)

In the writings of some Jewish mystics, for example, in *Sefer Yetzirah*, the arrangement of the three basic letters, i.e., *alif*, *meem* and *sheen* was reversed. The devotees were told to read these three letters in the reverse order, and while they did so, they should think about their additional qualities in their imagination, for example *sheen*/fire with convulsions, *meem*/water with peace and contentment, and *alef*/air with the silence of Nothingness.

The view is that the creation of the universe came into effect by ten commands from God, as the phrase, 'And God said ...' occurs ten times in the Torah. As these commands were manifested in the form of letters, the mystics tended to believe in the magical powers of letters. They thought that the art of proper arrangement of these letters would link them to God; some even thought that this art might equip them to be co-creators with God. (See, Kaplan, Aryeh. *Jewish Meditation*, New York, 1985, pp. 74-75)

The Kabbalistic process of understanding the numerical value of letters has special importance in the understanding of the Torah. According to it, this magical or exclusive knowledge of the Torah is meant for the select few. The three known processes of this art are as follows: first, *Gemaria*, where the numerical value of the letters is determined; the second is *Notarikon*, when the first and the last letter of the word are considered important; the third is *Temurah* which is, in fact, related to the special meaning of letters when they are arranged in the form of geometrical figures. In Muslim sources also, the art of attaching numerical value to letters

impulse - the *asr wa aghlaal* - be it intellectual or otherwise, will certainly appreciate this call. The Qur'an does not confer on any person, whosoever it may be, the sole right to interpret God's word. In Qura'nic weltanschauung any attempt to monopolize interpretative activities is highly undesirable and amounts to polytheism. The agency of *Ahbar wa Rahban* is simply unacceptable. Anyone attempting to intercept God's message or for that matter come in between God and man is condemnable, be he called a Rabbi, an Ahbaar, a Pope, a Maulvi or a Shaikh. No one is authorized to decide whose faith is valid or who can be taken as an authentic Muslim. Leave Muslims alone, the Qur'an warns us against falling into this evil trap, ever. It's God's prerogative, we are told:

﴿ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَفْصِلُ بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَمَةِ ﴾ (الحج: 17)

operates more or less in the same way. Some people think that *Jafr* is related to Imam Ja'far Sadiq though these personalities had nothing to do with this secret art. If we make a comparative study of the historical evolution of the art of numerical value among Muslims and the practice of this art by the Israelites, it becomes clear that all this trickery and sleight of hand had their origin in the aberrations of the Israelites. Even in the case of later scholars like Shah Waliullah and Ashraf Ali Thanawi, one finds recommendations for the yoga-like spiritual exercises or reading the two Qur'anic verses in conjunction with each other, which demonstrate the amazing impact of the rabbinic literature on them. This reached them through the writings of old mystics.

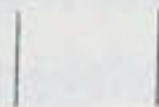
According to Abul Afia, the status of the letters of the Torah is that of a black spark that has been etched on the paper against the white background. The whole Torah can be delineated in a special arrangement of seventy two sacred letters that can be found in the four letters of Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh. Abul Afia said that these four letters should be brought into action during meditation in the following way:

Take the name of each letter and breathe deeply; do not take breath between two letters. Rather, take as deep a breath as possible and then pause or relax in the next breath, repeat this with every letter. In other words, take two breaths with each letter – one while pronouncing the letter, and the second one for pause and relaxation; and each breath should comprise both breathing in and breathing out. Do not use your lips while pronouncing the word as you breathe in and breathe out. Rather, you should adopt a method whereby the articulation of the letter should be in harmony with exhaling.

Quoted in Perle Epstein, *Kabbalah: the Way of Jewish Mystic*, p. 96)

In Abul Afia and other mystics, the method of meditation is, in fact, based on the hypothesis that there are different centres of energy hidden in the human body that can be activated through four sacred letters of Aramaic. Shah Waliullah and other Muslim

mystics exhort the devotee to imagine during meditation that the sky is overcast with white clouds, and sparks of heavenly light are raining down from the sky, soaking his whole body. The Islamic scholars and researchers regarded it just as a kind of psychological training. However, in the Jewish world of the twentieth century, when the writings of secular thinkers such as Martin Buber, Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, Issac Bashevis Singer, Moshe Idel, Franz Kafka have pulled away the veil of magic from the face of Cabbalistic literature, it is no longer difficult for us to understand that the non-Qur'anic methods of observing the Truth prevalent among Muslims were borrowed from Jewish mystic tradition. According to the Jewish mystic Isaac of Akku, if the devotee imagines the basic elements like air, fire and mountain in such a way so as to experience Moses' vision of the Truth, he can reach such heights in his meditation when his eyes would see the sky and the earth in such a way that their combined entity would seem to him to be a huge void. Now he should imagine a circle in this void, and then go on etching letters from the Torah in it. While doing so, he should feel as though those letters were vividly illuminated against the background of white paper. The devotee would feel that slowly a mist was gradually covering the dazzling letters, making it difficult to distinguish one thing from another. This is the stage of Nothingness where nothing exists besides God. The Jewish scholars and mystics had very close contact with Islamic cultures in the Abbasid Baghdad and Muslim Spain. In the light of this, it is not unreasonable to assume that the Zohari mysticism had its impact on Muslim thinking in this sphere.



Today the emergence of Islam has become synonymous with the cultural and political invasion of the Muslim people. This picture of Islam must be replaced by the true message of God that nullifies all sorts of invasion, be it cultural, religious, political or otherwise. Creating a situation where all sorts of people, despite their diversity of colour, race or language can sing together in unison the glory of one Lord, is the *summum bonum* that Islam stands for. The stage is set for such a universal Islam to emerge on the scene.

## An Islamic Future?

A post-democratic era is fast descending on us. Long cherished human ideals like liberty, human dignity and the idea of a free-society, are on a perpetual wane. Intellectual freedom, the very basis of any future-oriented civilised society, is under serious threat today throughout the globe, more so, in the western world, the traditional bastion of modern democracy.

The 9/11 has intensified not what is mistakenly dubbed as the 'clash of civilizations' but a real battle between liberty and fascism, between freedom and fanaticism. Long before 9/11, more particularly after the dismantlement of the Soviet Union, the western world was moving from liberal pluralism to evangelical democracy, from Plutocracy to post-democracy, a situation that has yet to be properly defined. Though old cliché like keeping human rights on guard or propagating democratic ideals were still the bane of American foreign policy, the policy makers in Washington D.C., it appeared to many of us, no longer believed in the sovereignty of other functional democracies. While democratic ideals demanded from us that we respect the sovereignty of nation states, those championing the cause of

evangelical democracy were hell-bent on exporting the American way of living to other parts of the globe. The war for democracy then attained the pitch of an imperial war, a mad rush for the coca-colization of the entire planet.

Democracy can mean many things for as many people in different parts of the world depending on the socio-religious makeup of the society. Any attempt to define democracy in monolithic terms will result in the negation of the very spirit of democracy itself. If the democratic conscience of America can allow capital punishment within its territory, there is no moral justification for objecting to the French decision of banning headscarves or other religious symbols from its state-run schools, or condemning the Muslim societies for not accepting lesbians and gays as constitutional minority. In their naivety to envision and export a monolithic democracy by hook or by crook, policy makers in western capitals have greatly wounded liberal democracy. Democracy, the mode of relatively peaceful political change that mankind had invented in its centuries long journey, is now unfortunately a finished phenomenon. Now, democracy has become a choice between the lesser and greater evils, as in the recent elections in the US and the UK people had no other choice but to choose from stale and sick options; between Carey and Bush, or between Labour and Tory. The absence of any effective democratic voice in the traditional bastions of liberal democracy has resulted in growing numbers of detention camps across the globe where fellow humans are dehumanized. The days of Gulag Archipelago and the horrors of Auschwitz are back again. And this time on a much greater scale.

Can democracy triumph again? In post-democratic era it is becoming increasingly difficult for an individual to wage an all-out popular struggle for the restoration of human dignity. What characterizes a post-democratic situation is the ambiguity about the origins of its sources of power. It is not that easy to say pin-

pointedly who controls the state apparatus. Apparently, it alludes that the American empire through its detention 'facilities' scattered around the world controls the globe. But within the Empire and outside it there are many not so visible and uncontrollable power centers; the empire-like MNCs, the trans-national NGOs, the ultra-rich foundations and trusts, financial institutions controlling the destiny of 'independent' nations and the media channels controlled and owned by a few rich individuals. In this post-democratic chaos we do not know how to push for a reform or how even a humble beginning can be made in the right direction. Not the western democracy alone has come to a dead-end; it has brought the individual to an ideological vacuum.

The fear of post-democracy is much more frightening than the vague notions of the 'End of History'. For the upholders of 'endism' may believe that history might restart again while the post-democratic vacuum brings us to a desperate feeling that there remains nothing ideologically sustainable to bank upon, that history has gone completely out of gear and now we are heading towards an unknown destination. Having been afraid of what future holds for them, many of us are desperate to get off of the globe but feel it is already too late. The complete control over the world system of mega-corporations and their capitalist sister concerns has made political leadership impotent as agents of any future revolution. It is simply ridiculous to believe that any state, howsoever powerful it might appear, can reign in the ruthless, cruel capitalist devils. Worse still, the mega-corporations control the world media; General Electric (NBC, CNBC, MSNBC), Time Warner (CNN), Disney (ABC) and Viacom (CBS). They show us only what they want us to see, keeping us constantly unaware of the real situation lest it should generate a powerful movement against their plundering and colonization of the globe.

The situation is very gloomy. Apparently there is no one to rescue this planet and its inhabitants from this chaos and disorder. As for peace or green movements or international human rights organizations that voice their concern from time to time, they too are, in a way, an extension of the same ruthless capitalist system as they greatly depend on it for their financial grants and endowments. Capitalism will allow them as long as they are containable or pose no serious threat to its ever growing greed. We will be mistaken if we believe that peace movements or anti-war coalitions can bring any radical change in the foreseeable future. There are instances when these groups were cut to size whenever an opportunity arose or when they really became too loud to contain. In October 2000 some fifty American NGOs -- including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch -- had called on the UN 'to hold the United States accountable for the intractable and persistent problem of discrimination'. And at a UN conference against racism, held in Durban a few days before 9/11, some NGOs almost rebelled against the status quo endorsing a resolution that said that the free-market economy was a 'fundamentally flawed system'. But such voices of reason had to be quieted down in the backdrop of 'war on terror' and especially after the promulgation of draconian anti-terrorism laws that encroached upon basic human rights.

Where shall we then turn to? The death of Democracy has left us with no choice but to explore other possible avenues for an alternative world system. At the moment there are no readymade options available. True, there exists the Book of God amongst us, but for centuries it has been kept wrapped up in safe places. Then, there are those amongst us whom Jesus called 'salt of earth' and 'light on the hill' and those who still look at themselves as God's chosen people apart from varieties of religious seers who day in and day out call for global peace. But they all lack a viable plan that can rescue the planet from the present morass. God's chosen

people as they themselves believe to be, the Jews have been mainly interested in salvation of their own folk alone. And Christianity in her enthusiasm to cater to the aspirations of every body has made so many compromises in the course of its history that now it appears no more a city on the hill. Nonetheless, there are nice, desperate souls among the Jews and Christians and also among other faith communities, but despite their realization that the problem we confront is global and needs a global effort, for centuries they have been trained to work in isolation. As each community is interested in her own domination and salvation, their communitarian project has no attraction for the others. The same is true with some enthusiastic proponents of Islam who envision future in terms of global Muslim domination or for that matter with those who believe that the western civilization has lost its vigour and now it is time for the Chinese or Indian civilization to take over. Envisioning Islam or any global ideology for that matter, as a cultural or civilizational construct has always had disastrous implications. Islam, the universal message of God, an invitation to all to submit to one Lord God alone, has yet to move out of the civilizational shadows cast on her during the Abbasid era, the so called golden age of Islam.

The world we live in today is an interwoven and interdependent world. Any ideology claiming to be capable of its redemption must acquire a universal look and appeal. Any attempt to revive Muslim civilization, as it is conceived by most of us, will not only be counter-productive but will also go against the Qur'anic intent. Those willing to rescue the world from its present morass must look at their ideological make up first whether they really carry a message that has universal appeal of a prophetic magnitude.

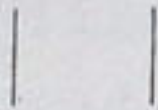
Let me elaborate. Islam, as it is generally conceived today, is a mix of the Divine message and Muslim history. A lot of cultural and historical elements have gone into the making of what we call

today the Muslim identity. The same is true of almost all religions and ideologies and that is why they have limited appeal. They cater to the needs and aspirations of specific people. This picture of Islam, of a religion that originated and prospered in Arabia, or as a religion of the Middle-Eastern people is not its true picture. However, owing to some historical reasons and classical *fiqhi* debates about the world divided into *darul-Islam* and *darul-kufr*, our *fuqaha* believed that the essential colour of Islam was Arab. Today the emergence of Islam has become synonymous with the cultural and political invasion of the Muslim people. This picture of Islam must be replaced by the true message of God that nullifies all sorts of invasion, be it cultural, religious, political or otherwise. Creating a situation where all sorts of people, despite their diversity of colour, race or language can sing together in unison the glory of one Lord, is the *summum bonum* that Islam stands for. The stage is set for such a universal Islam to emerge on the scene.

The eternal message of God, as the Qur'an is, it must be equally relevant for all time and for all places, for all geographical and linguistic groups, male or female. Its Arabicness cannot be overemphasized to give the Arab people an edge over non-Arabs. In the formative days of popular Islam when the mission of Islam got transformed into the Empire's ideology and in course of our interpretative activities leading to canonization of Muslim creed, a sort of Muslimness -- the emphasis on belonging to the mainstream and popular creed placing much stress on the outward manifestations became part and parcel of the Islamic faith. Since then, owing to the fear of *fitna*, Muslim orthodoxy gradually established itself leaving little room for other possible projections. The door of *ijtihad* was declared closed and the ulema kept a heavy guard on the Book of God lest some one should dare to open the Book for directly seeking guidance bypassing the guardians of orthodoxy. As long as the Muslim empire survived

in various forms in Baghdad, Spain, Turkey and India, the ulema, like the Catholic Church, made it a point that the right to interpret the Book of God should remain their sole prerogative. The situation however is changing fast not because of the waning hold of orthodoxy but due to the creation of some extra-space in cyber world where desperate souls the world over can engage with the Divine text on their own to formulate a commonly agreed charter for a new world. And internet is not the only space where orthodoxy has little control. Muslim societies having experienced many false dawns inspired and generated by revivalist movements are involved in serious soul-searching. Many a long-held cultural norms and religious beliefs are under intense investigation. The disparity between the Prophetic Islam and historical Islam has in fact caught our gaze.

A new beginning for the Prophetic Islam may usher in, what Fukuyama would call, 'getting history started again'.



It is high time to visualize a future world in which no one single group is let free to dominate the center-stage but all are united as one single family in worship of one God. For such a broad, all embracing vision of Islam to move forward effectively Muslims must come out of their traditional mind-set.



Never before in human history mankind has been so willing to give the planet a new direction and so restless to topple the world system, and for that matter to move in unison, hand in hands with other fellow human beings, irrespective of his/ her colour and creed. There are millions of attentive ears desperately waiting for a word of solace and for an invitation to a concerted, joint, global action - the *كلمة سواء*, as the Qur'an puts it. But where are those who claim to uphold the common plan for global action, the upholders of the Last Revelation?

## International Council on Islam

**T**he world is in turmoil. Worse still, the Muslim Ummah which otherwise should have taken care of this grieving situation is in a complete mess. The confusion within the House of Islam about its future course of action has left the world at the mercy of those who show no inkling of the divine guidance, nor any respect for the planet earth and its inhabitants. We are caught in a situation where our technological prowess, accompanied with unmindful, unethical and Godless Globalization have brought us to a global doom. We, the inhabitants of planet earth, really do not know where shall we go from here?

Upholders of the Last Revelation as they claim to be, the followers of Prophet Mohammed have a special role assigned to them in contemporary history. It is they who have been commanded by God and His prophet to take care of any ills that may afflict the humanity in future. Yet despite so clear guidelines about their role in the Holy Qur'an if Muslims appear today on the margins of history, it is mainly due to some of their self-

created illusions. Firstly, instead of looking at themselves as the *khaire Ummah*, the benefactor to humanity, they got lost in their own internal strife looking at everything from a communitarian angle. The one world of God, of which they were assigned the responsibility, appeared to them divided into *darul-Islam* and *darul-kufr*, the latter part being practically wiped out from their scheme of things. Secondly, the emergence of a *fiqhi* thinking among Muslims, of looking at things in black and white and from a purely communitarian angle forced them to look at the 'other' as rivals and at themselves as just another Ummah that still can lead an Islamic life in isolation. Thirdly, they missed the point that the Ummah as a whole were assigned a leadership role and this great task demanded from them that they maintain a living relation with the Revelation, always keep their eyes open and be watchful of the course of history. But unfortunately the Muslim masses gradually lost touch with the Qur'anic Revelation, assigning as they did, the sole responsibility to a group of ulema to specialise in the art of Qur'anic learning and they, in turn, conveniently relied on the *Fatawas* of the ulema, the religious decrees. However, the ulema too could not do their job well as they, mainly due to their blind opposition to scientific knowledge and rational thinking got trapped in some basic misconceptions about the nature of knowledge itself. Hence, what Elders had written or told in their *responsa* were looked at as the supreme branch of Islamic knowledge that the latter generations were to emulate. This attitude of veneration towards the Elders, the *salaf*, signalled closing of the Muslim mind. Like the condemned Jews who, due to their disrespect for the Divine guidance, lost their leadership role, we Muslims too were left with no option but to imitate others, the replica of a condemned aping nation, and a living example of *قردة خاسئين*. Fourthly, the very emergence of a class of Muslim divines was an innovation in Islam. This in fact was the birth of a rabbinic mind that gradually turned a simple

*deen* of God into a complex system of legist, the *fuqaha* or so to say the *Ahbar-o-Rahban* of Islam. While the Muslim masses remained contented that the ulema had taken care of the prophetic responsibilities, of keeping the Ummah connected with the Divine Revelation, the ulema, on the contrary, came to believe that the Elders had extracted everything from the Qur'an and that there was nothing new that cannot be found in the corpus of *fiqh*. Some of the brilliant scholars of Islam openly declared that there was almost nothing left to involve a thinking mind and that the sole function of an *aalim* was to inform the masses of what our Elders have thought or written on any specific issue. The sole purpose of a human head, many among us seemed to believe, was just to hold a *tarbush* or cap on it. Fifthly, the ulema, calling themselves as deputies of the Prophet, had in fact reserved for themselves a position next to the prophet. This exclusive claim of being the sole inheritor of the Prophetic heritage coupled with their misplaced justification for a hierarchical order of religious authority, of *فاستلوا اهل الذكر*, clearly gave them an upper hand over the Revelation. Amidst the *fiqhi* hair-splitting not only the essence of obedience was lost but the very scope and nature of knowledge acquired a ghetto meaning among Muslims. The scholar among Muslims was no more a person who, as the Qur'an puts it, by studying the signs of God in the universe gets astounded by the Divine awe, but one who was a master of hair-splitting debates centred on a few 'Islamic' issues.

The decline of the Muslim Ummah and the thrusting aside of the Divine Revelation brought the course of human history into uncharted destinations. The modern world, created as it is unmindful of the Divine guidance, bears innumerable and unsustainable pitfalls. Most of our development schemes have brought us to a situation where things have moved beyond our control. We are a mute spectator to the gross violation of human

rights, nay rather human dignity, across the world. Ruthless and callous hands of capitalism are now active in the name of Globalization giving us the mad awful feeling that there is virtually no place to take refuge. The ever-burdening tax system has made us a perpetual prisoner in an ecologically plundered planet where looms the real danger of eventual destructions by man-made nukes and other WMDs. In short, we are forced to live in a perpetual fear of the future in an age of global imbalance.

Given the enormity of the crisis, submitted souls around the world, in different religious and cultural traditions, have eventually awakened to the situation. There has been a growing awareness that there is only one planet at our disposal and if we have to have a future for it, we cannot afford to ignore any further the Divine principles to live in harmony with nature. In fact the call for the liberation of the world from the clutches of the rebel leadership has become a rallying cry today. In recent years, millions have taken to the street to register their uncompromising opposition to this ruthless capitalist order and its ever-widening schemes of war and destruction. Among the proponents of various religious traditions, the God-fearing, future-loving and life-affirming children of God, it is seriously being debated that a change in world-leadership must take place, that the obedient children of God must come to the fore to give our world a leadership and direction. Our debates and deliberations on many thorny issues at various interfaith forums, anti-war rallies, peace platforms and ecological gatherings have in fact been centring on this theme. Never before in human history mankind has been so willing to give the planet a new direction and so restless to topple the world system, and for that matter to move in unison, hand in hands with other fellow human beings, irrespective of his/ her colour and creed. There are millions of attentive ears desperately waiting for a word of solace and for an invitation to a concerted, joint, global action – the *كلمة سواء*, as the

Qur'an puts it. But where are those who claim to uphold the common plan for global action, the upholders of the Last Revelation?

The Qur'an, as were the other divine books, is like natural resources for everyone to benefit, a common treasure for the entire mankind. Such a crucial document cannot be taken as a religious book of Muslims alone nor the right to interpret such a vital document can be made the sole prerogative of a group of humans, no matter howsoever sacred position socially and psychologically they command. The Book on which depends the future of mankind certainly deserves a better handling than leaving it entirely to a group of few *not-infallible* human minds. The Qur'an, as it claims to be the book of guidance for all those seeking solace (هدى للمتقين), speaks for itself. It is remarkably clear in style and its language is perfectly communicative. The words of God certainly need no human authority to confirm its intent. Rather, it demands from us that we humans, instead of interpreting it to our convenience, shall submit ourselves unconditionally to whatever it commands. And given the centrality of the Qur'anic Revelation in the grand scheme of God, the Muslim Ummah is urgently required today to withdraw its exclusive claim on this book and table it as a common agenda for mankind.

An unconventional approach to Islam and its basic document, the Qur'an, is demanded not from Muslims alone. All those who have submitted to one God and are desirous of His blessings and guidance can ignore the book at their own peril. How can one ignore a message from the same God whom he claims to obey and submit to? The God-fearing people need a holistic approach. We must affirm that Islam is not the religion of Muslims alone. It is the common heritage of us all. The religion of Abraham, of Ishmael and Isaac, of Jacob and Joseph, of David and Solomon, of Moses and Jesus and of innumerable prophets who invited

mankind to worship one Lord God and get united in a true paradigm of oneness. We must also affirm that Islam is not a mere ideological badge to wear, or something like the star of David to put on, but an unconditional attitude of submission to one God. The triumph of Islam must guarantee the return of sanity to our world, giving us a general feeling of comfort and freedom. And certainly it must not amount to the subjugation of other nations by the Muslim people, for doing so would amount to the negation of Islam itself. In short, the triumph of Islam would herald the return of innocence to our world.

This, no doubt, is a gigantic task. We affirm that as upholders of the Last Revelation we are duty bound to make it happen. We also believe that this is no exclusively communitarian project and hence we must invite participation from the outside, from all those who share our aspirations and dreams, as God Himself would like us to do:

‘Say: O people of the book; come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not, from among ourselves Lords and Patrons other than God...’ (Qur’an, 3:64).

This then is the ideological background of the proposed International Council on Islam. The idea is not to gather conventional Muslims alone but to forge a working alliance with the submitters of other religious traditions as well. In its scope, the council will be more than an inter-faith platform, a truly global forum of the obedient children of God. We are inviting religious seers, top business leaders, social and political thinkers, major policy makers, ruling elite and the thinking individuals to join hands for the common good of humanity, or as the Qur’an puts it, to compete one another in acts of goodness:

﴿ فَاسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ ﴾ (المائدة: 48)

# Glossary

<i>Abbar</i>	The religious priest or clergy who claims to be a representative of God on earth and monopolises on interpreting His commands
<i>Ahiya al Uloom</i>	<i>Revival of knowledge</i> (in Islam)
<i>Ahl-adh-dhikr</i>	God-conscious people who excel in piety and knowledge
<i>ahl-sunnah wa al-jama'ah</i>	mainstream Muslims
<i>Alif/ Meem/ Sheen</i>	alphabets in Hebrew and Arabic
<i>al-mantiq al-wijdani</i>	intuitive wisdom
<i>al-nabi al-ummi</i>	the Prophet of Makkah
<i>al-rasikhoon fil Ilm</i>	genuine scholars
<i>amal-e-saalih</i>	good deeds that may be beneficial to the humanity in general
<i>Asabiyah</i>	bias, communitarian or nationalistic feelings
<i>ayah rajm</i>	the supposed verse of the Qur'an that lays down stoning to death as a punishment for adultery
<i>Baheshti Zewar</i>	<i>Ornaments of Heaven</i> , name of a popular encyclopaedic book on Islam by Ashraf Ali Thanvi

<i>dars nizami</i>	the famed syllabus of Islamic education designed in the 18 <sup>th</sup> and still widely in use throughout the sub-continent
<i>darul-Iftah</i>	the institution responsible for issuing religious edicts
<i>darul-Islam</i>	The abode of Islam, a general term for Muslim Lands where Islamic way of living is held supreme
<i>da'wa</i>	calling people to God
<i>deen</i>	a way of harmonious living
<i>fas'alu ahl al-zikr</i>	'Ask the knowledgeable' or those who know God's way
<i>Fatawa Al-Hindiya,</i>	the famous Encyclopaedia of Muslim Jurisprudence compiled at the behest of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb Aalamgir
<i>fatawas</i>	religious edicts
<i>fiqh</i>	legal hair-splitting, Jurisprudence
<i>fitna</i>	strife, confusion
<i>fuqaha</i>	the legist, framers / interpreters of Muslim-law
<i>Gemarah</i>	another version of the <i>Mishnah</i> , the Talmud
<i>ghuloo</i>	imbalance, losing sense of proportion
<i>hadith</i>	sayings attributed to the Prophet
<i>halal</i>	permissible, sanctioned by God
<i>haram</i>	unlawful, prohibited
<i>hijab</i>	veil
<i>hijab-e-akbar</i>	the great veil
<i>hikmah</i>	wisdom
<i>Hizbollab</i>	the party of God

Glossary

<i>hujjatul-Islam</i>	the ultimate authority on Islam
<i>hukm</i>	commandment
<i>ijma</i>	consensus
<i>Imam-Ghaib</i>	the hidden Imam
<i>iman</i>	the Faith
<i>Injil</i>	Gospel, the New Testament
<i>Jafr</i>	Numerology as known to Muslims
<i>jaheliyyah</i>	the pre-Islamic period characterised by an unscientific worldview
<i>Jama'a Islamia</i>	the band of Islam
<i>kalimatun siwaen</i>	terms of mutual agreement, a common minimum programme
<i>kippah</i>	skullcap worn by the Jews
<i>kuffar</i>	plural of <i>Kafir</i> , the rebel of God
<i>madarsas</i>	religious seminaries
<i>Maulanas</i>	my lord, a term of respect for Muslim divines
<i>mawaali</i>	the system of extending social security to a non-Arab tribe in early Arab-Islamic society
<i>Mishnah</i>	the first collection of <i>Oral Torah</i> that was committed to writing by Rabbi Yehudah (Judah) the Prince. Divided into six parts, it is like the <i>Sihah Sitta</i> among the Jews
<i>mubah</i>	allowed, sanctioned
<i>mufasssiroon</i>	Exegete, Commentators of the Qur'an
<i>muhaddithoon</i>	scholars of traditions who evaluate the authenticity of a saying attributed to the Prophet
<i>mujaddid</i>	reformer
<i>mujahideen-e-Islam</i>	warriors of Islam

## Futurizing Islam

*When people will be connected together  
 When the female child buried alive will be questioned for what crime  
 was she killed  
 When the dissemination of written material will know no bounds  
 When the Garden will be brought to near  
 Shall each soul know what it has put forward  
 (Al-Qur'an 81:7-14)*

While reading these lines of the Qur'an one comes across a post-modern spatial scenario and is immediately reminded of the World Wide Web. Here, the vision of the Day of Judgment suddenly gets mixed with a mundane living, a world where modern life has almost taken over the traditional space. No wonder, the Qur'an, as the word of God it is, enables us to see the past, the present and the future in one single vision like a sudden glimpse of a lightning flash.

The creation of a virtual space away from the real world is no ordinary wonder. A world where millions are actively engaged in deliberations on issues -- almost anything under the sky is a phenomenon rapidly molding even the most conservative

<i>mujtahid</i>	a seasoned mind that seeks guidance direct from the Qur'an
<i>munafiq</i>	hypocrite
<i>Muslim Haneef</i>	pure-submitter, God-oriented believer
<i>neo-tawhid</i>	A religious movement in the 18 <sup>th</sup> century Arabia led by Mohammed bin Abdulwahhab that laid great emphasis on the revival of Islamic faith by going back to the pristine purity of Islam
<i>rabbani</i>	belonging to God
<i>rabbaniin</i>	God-centred submitter
<i>rabbul aalameen</i>	Lord of all nations
<i>responsa</i>	a religious edict
<i>rijal</i>	the science of evaluating the authenticity of a <i>hديث</i>
<i>sab'a muallaqat</i>	seven hangings (of poetry) that were on display at the <i>Ka'ba</i> prior to Islam
<i>salaf</i>	Guardians of the Faith in early Islam
<i>salf-saleheen</i>	Pious Elders (of early Islam)
<i>shariah</i>	the norms of living as stipulated in the Qur'an
<i>shirk</i>	polytheism
<i>Sipah-Sahaba</i>	the army of the companions (of the Prophet)
<i>Sunnah</i>	words, deeds or/and tacit approval of the Prophet on any specific issue
<i>sunnatullah</i>	the way of God, operational forces in the universe
<i>tallit</i>	A small shawl worn by the Jews during prayers
<i>taqleed</i>	blind following, uncreative imitation

<i>taqwa</i>	piety, God-consciousness
<i>tarboosh</i>	the head-dress or turban used by Muslim divines
<i>tawhid</i>	a system of belief in the Oneness of God that accepts all prophets of God as upholders of the same mission
<i>ulema</i>	singular <i>aalim</i> , a religious scholar
<i>uloom naqaliyyah</i>	knowledge based on transmission (from divine sources)
<i>uloom sharei</i>	singular <i>ilm sharei</i> , religions sciences (of Islam), expertise in Islamic religious books
<i>Ummah Muhammadiya</i>	the nation of Mohammed
<i>Ummah Muslimah</i>	nation of the submitters to one God
<i>ummati</i>	my nation, my cult
<i>ummi</i>	(people) of Makkah
<i>ummul qura'</i>	an old name for Makkah
<i>warasat</i>	inheritance
<i>zakah</i>	mandatory charity

Instead of relying on the wisdom of the dead souls or mindlessly quoting from this scholar or that seer, the time has come to apply our own minds, to look into the Qur'an for a fresh guidance in our milieu. If the four great scholars (Imams) of the past can be given the right to formulate a code of living for us based on their specific understanding of the Revelation, can we deny the same honour to a fifth or a sixth capable individual simply for his late arrival in history?



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amongst us. The cyber world has no official clergy whom one has to look up for approval nor is it possible here to subdue an alternative opinion with the barrel of a gun. In the cyber world there is no capital city, no focused metropolis, no center and no periphery. It is a truly post-modern scenario where the human mind is free to build his/her own mental picture from the flood of floating thought fragments. In a world thus created ideas are judged on their own merit, without any weight of the pulpit attached to them. Endowed with a profound sense of good and evil, here human mind is equally exposed to Satan and his adversaries. Amidst a plethora of set answers to pet questions dug up from ancient books there are also issues inviting us to think afresh. From superficial propaganda to serious academic debates, the net world has created much of a scenario of *إذ الصحف نشرت* a big bang of ideas.

The stage is set for a free, frank and truly international debate, for the emergence of a pure message of God without any local color or cultural and geographical moorings. Islam, as it is the message of God to humanity and Mohammed as he is a Warner to all and a blessing for the entire world, where then such a universal message and its prophet can find a better appreciation than the Cyber world? The traditional Muslim mind is baffled as the new space has pushed the old division of the world as *darul-Islam* or *darul-Kufr* into oblivion. It is not possible any more to live in watertight compartments. Those fond of looking at the world through a cultural glass or identifying the message of God with Arab culture may find uncomfortable with the new, culture-free understanding of God's message in the world wide web. Calling Islam a Middle-Eastern religion is a fashion on steep decline and so is the traditional projection of Islam by some of its revered exponents who presents it in an Arab cultural straitjacket.

In some weak moments of Muslim history our intellectuals and Ulema believed that the only way to ensure survival of Islam was

to preserve the outer manifestations of the traditional mode of living. Ibne Taimiyah's famous treatise *Iqtidha Sirat al-MSutaqeen fi Mukhalefat Ashab al-Jaheem*, a desperate move to arrest our decline, is perhaps the most telling document of a misplaced vision. The Islam that emerges from such treatises is all about a sense of dressing and a penchant for staying away from the 'other'. من تشبه بقوم فهو منهم This fake and unworthy tradition, a mere *asnad jayyid* by Ibne Taimiyah's own admission, has been instrumental in shaping the Muslim mind of the decline period. Identification of Islam with the Arab culture created serious doubts about its universal claim and brought the Islamic *dawah* to a halt in non-Arabian regions. So influential was this single treatise that its echo is found in different places throughout the ages. In India, Ahmed Sirhindi and Shah Waliullah considered it an obligation for the faithful to resist any thing non-Arab and take pride in everything Arab. Unfortunately, this exclusive Arab color of Islam has come to be regarded so natural that for most of us today it is almost impossible to visualize an authentic Muslim without an Arabian or Eastern dress. For centuries we are told that wearing a non-Arabian dress or even getting to a non-Arabian hair-style can make one's faith void. Even learning a foreign language is not spared. Based on their understanding of this fabricated tradition, it became completely *haram* (unlawful) to learn the Persian language. And this unlawfulness, by all implications, should now be extended to English, French, German and other foreign languages. For it was mistakenly believed, as Ibne Taimiyah has it, that the Persian language makes one *munafiq* (hypocrite). Worse still, according to this view, if a Muslim gets settled in a non-Muslim land, on the Day of Judgment he will meet his fate with the *Kuffar*.

This geographical and cultural projection of a universal *deen* not only forced Muslims to limit themselves within the psychological boundaries of their own making, it also created a sense of fear and

hatred for the other. As opposed to the message of the Qur'an calling for a global society based on *tawhid*, the upholders of the *neo-tawhid* were claiming that they alone have patented the worship of one true God. Unmindful of the far reaching negative implications of this closed-mind set, the *neo-tawhidis* went on preaching: 'it is commonly held belief of *ahl-Sunnah wa al-jama'ah* that the Arab race has an edge over the non-Arabs'. Besides betraying the essential Islamic teachings, such highly irresponsible pronouncements paved the way for an Arab versus non-Arab and East versus West clash.

In an ever-shrinking world where the believers have no other option but to ride on the same globe alongside with the non-believers, the *neo-tawhidi* understanding of Islam is put to scrutiny. Sitting in an Internet Café in the Arabian city of Qaseem or Riyadh, the faithful is virtually breathing in the same world with millions totally stranger to him. What otherwise might be considered abhorring, in a private chat room the believer and the non-believer, the male and the female get mixed. A dialogue, fraught with all kinds of danger though, becomes unavoidable.

The *neo-Taubidis* alone are not to be blamed for this closed mind-set. There are the Indians, the Chinese, the Jews and the Americans all up to claim a sole right on the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For quite sometime they have been conditioned to think in purely nationalistic, nay, rather jingoistic terms. For many among them the vital question is for whom the 21<sup>st</sup> century? In a situation where the buzzword is domination over the 'other' it is no surprise if a group of Muslims too sincerely feels that after the dismantlement of the 'evil empire' the only hurdle in establishing their hegemony is the 'evil Americans' whose fall they must engineer. While this attitude otherwise appears to be a natural corollary of what goes on in the real world, nonetheless, it belittles our hope in the future. If religiously inspired Muslims,

who still have some vague sense of being given the responsibility of leading history till the end time, envision the future of our globe in terms of domination, where would one look for a refuge? Islam has come to liberate people from all kinds of domination and if Muslims end up in replacing others' domination by their own, it will defeat the very purpose of their existence.

It is high time to visualize a future world in which no one single group is let free to dominate the center-stage but all are united as one single family in the worship of one God. For such a broad, all embracing vision of Islam to move forward effectively Muslims must come out of their traditional mind-set. Unless we realize that we too, like our ancestors, have been endowed with heads on our shoulders and that the sole function of our head is not just to place a cap or a tarbush on it, we cannot put aside the intellectual garbage that we have so willingly accumulated in the course of our centuries long intellectual journey. For a people so fond of using epithets like 'Islamic Art', 'Islamic Philosophy', 'Islamic Architecture' etc. it would be a great challenge to concede that we as Ummah Muslimah were not entrusted to create, what we did, the grandeur of Abbasid Baghdad, or the splendor of Moorish Spain. It needs no less than a paradigm shift to realize that the architectural wonder of the Taj and other marvels of Mughal India that sometimes remind us of our 'glorious' past, were in fact a digression from our original prophetic plan.

The traditional mind that considers 'Islam as history' equally valid as 'Islam as Revelation' and insists that the latter must be understood in conformity with the former, has posed a great challenge to our return to pure Islam. It has created serious confusion in young minds about the nature and function of Islam itself. For example, in the West, revival of Arab or eastern culture has acquired religious sanctity. National liberation struggles in different parts of the world fought by Muslims are looked as Jihad activity, a religious obligation. True, Muslims as a nation are the

worst victims today of the Bush-Blair tyranny. And it is also true that a nation being continuously inflicted with fresh wounds has the right to fight back, to resist the way it can. But a prophetic vision and concern for all demands from us that we, as upholders of the last Revelation, must look beyond mere self-rescue operations. No doubt, it is we who were dehumanized in Guantanamo Bay and Abu Gharib prison and burnt alive in the streets of Gujarat. It is our blood spilling on a daily basis in Palestine and other places. Yet we should not forget in our most nerve shaking moments that we cannot inflict on others what they did to us. God forbid! We cannot indulge in dehumanization of fellow humans or take innocent lives. And this is the source of our strength.

In a world where the religious leaders have long established the norm of looking at each single issue from a communitarian angle, securing the interest of their community more than the truth, calling on Muslim ulema alone to look beyond mere Muslim interest will raise many eyebrows. But if we are sensitive to the plight of Man and aware of our religious responsibilities towards humanity at large we cannot let each day pass sitting idly in our fortress of *Muslimness* hoping that one day everything will be fine.

We understand that putting history again on its original prophetic course is no ordinary venture. We also understand that there are no set responses to the highly complex situation that we are in today, nor we, at [futureislam.com](http://futureislam.com), intend to gather various possible answers, rather we insist on *creating* one. We are no prophets, nevertheless we carry on the legacy of Abraham. It is a great challenge. But who can be better suited to accept this challenge than those who uphold the Last Revelation?

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If the four great scholars (*fuqaha*) of the past can be given the right to formulate a code of living for us based on their specific understanding of the Revelation, can we deny the same honour to a fifth or a sixth capable individual simply for his late arrival in history?

## The Death of a Discourse

With American hegemony firmly established, now we hear of an American Islam which, as Iran's spiritual leader Ali Khamnaei has complained, is 'a backward Islam that falls in line with American principles and Western ideals'. Khamnaei and other leaders of the Muslim world have reason to worry. The recent years have witnessed an upsurge in modern day messiah of Muslims who look at Islam from the tainted glass of American foreign policy and call Mr. Bush 'the Muslim World Saviour'. To them or perhaps more appropriately *for* them, 'Bush is bringing liberation, not war'. We have Muslims in America who would openly advocate, nay rather incite, that 'an invasion of Iraq would be the single best path to reform Arab world'. Then there are enthusiasts ready to fight in Iraq 'with America' and 'for America' as they see it a 'divine commitment', 'a covenant with the nation'. This, then, is American Islam.

Judging from the buzzword in Riyadh, Cairo or Islamabad, this Muslim passion for America is not just on the fringe. The stronger and dominant voice of Islam sees in Iraq a conflict not only between the oppressor and the oppressed, colonizer and the colonized, more so they look at it as a battle between Islam and

*Kufr*, a Jihad activity. What goes on in Iraq is indeed a painful scenario but looking at it in black and white will be an oversimplification of the whole complex multi-faceted issue. Among the Bathists, the Islamists, the nationalists are also people who have discovered in the resistance movement an opportunity for advancing their own petty agenda. True, imperialism of any sort must be resisted but in order to support and strengthen the resistance we need not twist religious dicta. For tomorrow if the final outcome is different from the one expected of a Jihad – and this is very likely in the Iraqi case as it happened in the Mujahedeen's Afghanistan – it will only add further disillusionment to the Islamist camp. The neo-Wahabi ulema who have recently issued a fatwa declaring Resistance in Iraq a purely Islamic Jihad, a religious obligation on the faithful, have gone a bit too far in their love for Iraq. However, the neo-Wahabis are not alone in their use, rather misuse, of religious vocabulary. The same is true of the mainstream ulema and religious organizations. They have either lent their credibility to the Jihad fervour or preferred to keep quite 'in the greater interest of the Ummah'.

The issue we take up here for consideration is not which side of the conflict one should be on, but about how our religious sensibilities should be put to work with honesty and vital issues be undertaken with an open end. Intellectual dishonesty or lack of scruple may appear to be enhancing a struggle for the time being but in the long run it shakes the very ideological foundation that we stand on. The fatwaic vocabulary, intended to suppress any healthy discussion, has left the concerned Muslims in jitters; how come the same Islam that allows Muslims of the American variety to fight for America in Iraq may ask Muslims of other parts of the world to put a fierce resistance to the same invading army?

Be the upholders of the American Islam or their Wahabi counterparts or even the religious seers in Islamic Iran, they

equally miss the point that instead of looking at the issue afresh, and in the Qur'anic paradigm, they have been rather misled by a fatwaeic epistemology that leaves no room for any further enquiry or creative debate. fatwaeic thinking is not necessarily loaded with *fiqhi* jargons; it is a closed-mind set that denies any need for reconsideration. The fatwaeic mind relies mainly on its personal whims, likes and dislikes. This closed mind-set has virtually ruled out any possibility of a creative debate within the Ummah on issues of vital importance and brought us to a dead-end, a situation that may rightly be termed as the death of a discourse. And this in fact is the mother of all crises, a vicious circle in which the Ummah has been trapped in for many centuries. The situation demands that we look at the Qur'an afresh, in our own specific context, to discover a fresh answer. But the death of a creative discourse amongst us rules out any such opportunity.

Let us explain. In Pakistan, during Ayyub Khan's Presidency, the issue was tabled for a public debate that if Pakistan had to become an Islamic state which of the four or five schools of *fiqh* was to be given official patronage. The ulema, notwithstanding their being fully aware of the destructive potential of the question, simply preferred to evade any serious enquiry into the crux of our malaise and said that the *fiqh hanafi* as being the *fiqh* of majority of Pakistani Muslims should get the official status. We conveniently ignored the fact that those who adhere to a particular school of *fiqh* do so because they think that their school of *fiqh* is closer to the truth and therefore they will not be willing to give up their version of the truth. The creation of modern Pakistan and the new realities in the twentieth century were demanding from thinking Muslims and ulema a thorough probe into the psychological, historical and the socio-political bases of the conflicting *fiqhi* schools that look at the Revelation as a codified, rather fossilized set of instructions thus leaving no room

for a purely Qur'anic discourse to start afresh. Had this process of enquiry been initiated in Pakistan the country would certainly have put on a different look today.

We should not lose sight of the fact that the Qur'an is an ever-continuing discourse, an standing invitation to think, enquire, and keep formulating till an unachievable perfection. In the Qur'an, the oft repeated *qul* (say) in response to *qaloo/ yasalunak* (they ask) is indicative of the fact the Qur'an does not require from us to be prisoners of fatwaeic mind set. Instead, it demands from us to keep our hearts and minds always open (أَمْ عَلَى قُلُوبٍ أَقْفَالُهَا) and make good use of our reasoning faculties. Every individual is required to employ his own mind. Relying solely on the wisdom of the dead is a damper for seekers of truth. *Salaf* worship, no matter howsoever pious our Elders had happened to be, is no different from the mental slavery of the *mushrikoon* that receives God's utter condemnation:

﴿ وَجَدْنَا ءَابَاءَنَا كَذَالِكَ يَفْعَلُونَ ﴾ (الشعراء: 73)

The process of self-enquiry and the discourse on Man's role and position in the universe does not stop even after one's submission to God. A deeper understanding of the universe and the awe that such an understanding brings to a God-fearing heart empowers the individual for a leadership role:

﴿ إِنَّمَا تَخْشَى اللَّهَ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ الْعُلَمَاءُ ﴾ (فاطر: 28)

The believer, as he is an integral part of the Qur'anic discourse is never weary of a creative answer, not even in the wavering moments of crises:

﴿ أَمْ حَسِبْتُمْ أَنْ تَدْخُلُوا الْجَنَّةَ وَلَمَّا يَأْتِكُمْ مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ خَلَوْا مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ مَسَّتْهُمُ  
الْبَاسَاءُ وَالضَّرَآءُ وَزُلْزِلُوا حَتَّى يَقُولَ الرَّسُولُ وَالَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا مَعَهُ مَتَى نَصْرُ اللَّهِ

﴿ لَا إِنْ نَصَرَ اللَّهُ قَرِيبٌ ﴾ (البقرة: 214)

The demise of an internal debate within the Ummah has in fact left us fragmented. The sublime Revelation of the Qur'an, the uniting cohesive force of *tawhid* have been so fenced and re-fenced by the *fuqaha* and *mufasssiroon*, by the historians and the *mohaddithoon*, that a fresh and creative approach to the Qur'an is made almost impossible. The fences are so effective that in our enthusiasm to go by the Qur'an we eventually find ourselves drawn to a mindless imitation of the *salf-saleheen*. And this is certainly a replica of a dead nation that once was deprived of her originality and creative thinking and condemned to live a life in aping:

﴿ كُونُوا قِرَدَةً خَاسِئِينَ ﴾ (البقرة: 65)

An internal debate within the house of Islam holds promise of pulling down the pseudo-religious identities such as Hanafi, Shafei, Maleki or Hambali etc. Had we inherited a continuing discourse from the great *fuqaha* whom we look upon as sacred sources of religion, a set of divinely ordained people, the situation would certainly have been quite different. We cannot simply turn a blind eye to the historical factors responsible for the canonization of the four schools of *fiqh* in the ninth century. The canonization or recognition of the four schools among some forty existing schools was a compromise formula intended to end the internal strife. It cannot and should not be taken as a divine scheme. If the four great scholars of the past can be given the right to formulate a code of living for us based on their specific understanding of the Revelation, can we deny the same honour to a fifth or a sixth capable individual simply for his late arrival in history? No doubt, there have been some serious attempts in the past to roll back the culture of fossilized discourse. From Al-Zaheri to Ibn Hazm and from Ibne Taimiyah to Mohammed bin Abdulwahhab attempts were made to break the deadlock in Islamic thought. Inherently non-starters, as these efforts were,

nevertheless, they paved way for future reform activities. One should not downplay the iron-fist unity that the Wahabi Islam was eventually able to bring to the holy Harem in Makkah reducing the four simultaneous *fiqhi* prayers into one. However, the movements once so full of life and vigour gradually turned their revolutionary icons like Ibne Taimiyah and Mohammed bin Abdulwahhab into cult leaders, nipping all hopes for a return to the pristine purity of Islam.

The virtual closure of the Qur'an and building interpretative fences around it eventually resulted in the closing of the Muslim mind. Muslims of the later centuries had no option but to breathe in the *fiqhi* milieu of the Abbasid Baghdad. Living in the twenty first century we have an uncomfortable feeling that those who command our religious life are the great seers of the past, long dead and who cannot be blamed for not knowing enough of our specific context. For centuries we Muslims are without a living leader, without a living mind to interact with the Qur'an:

﴿يَرْبِ إِنَّ قَوْمِي اتَّخَذُوا هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ مَهْجُورًا﴾ (الفرقان: 30)

The Prophet has assured us, as the tradition has it, that Allah will elevate the nation that upholds the Qur'an. One wonders, why then the Muslim Ummah lags behind and always finds itself on a slippery-slope. None can match our passion for the Qur'an; from its careful recitation and memorization to the distribution of nicely printed and decorated copies. We have built a tradition that no other nation can boast of. Yet we are an ailing nation knowing not what it really amounts to uphold the Book of God. As most of us have come to regard the extra-scriptural material as a natural extension of the Qur'anic worldview, we mistakenly hold that the *fiqhi* recreation of Islam is a mere simplified version and the implementation of the *fiqh*, as though juristic dicta of the past can be as good as the Qur'an itself. Such mistaken notions that hold human interpretative activities infallible create serious misgivings about the nature and scope of any future Muslim civilization.

Our elevation through the Qur'an is only possible if we are willing to interact with the Qur'an on our own and have the nerve and courage to accept the challenge of Revelation. The Qur'an is an open invitation, an all-embracing book, a solace for the entire mankind. It calls for open-mindedness, greater tolerance, respect and acceptance of the other, justice and dignity for all. The true tawhidi paradigm enables the believer to look at the entire human race as children of one God in need of solace and salvation, and at himself, by virtue of being a follower of the Prophet, as a benefactor to the humanity. The nations that control the world today are probably a better embodiment of these ideals than us. And this is the secret of their leadership role. While we, torn in hair-splitting *fiqhi* debate, find it difficult to grant the same right of dignified living to people of other faith communities or even Muslims of a different hue. The fall of the Taliban was an emotional setback for the Ummah, but it was very much along the *sunnatullah*, the laws of nature. Those who cannot embrace their own brothers and sisters in faith how can they be entrusted with the responsibility of global leadership? Away from any *fiqhi* interruptions or interpolations we must recreate the universal Qur'anic vision of peace and justice for all. Unless we make a decisive return to the Qur'an the conflicting versions of Islam will keep us haunting and the much chanted slogans like 'Islam is the solution' or 'Qur'an is the Answer' will remain zombieified and Muslims will be seen as a fossilized nation among whom creative intellectual activity has come to an end.



The spiritual darkness that has gripped the entire world today is not idol worshipping or other superstitions. Instead, it is a sort of zombification of man, a casual living that has evolved due to our sheer inability to see the things as they are. The media has never been so powerful and mankind never relied so heavily on continuously bombarding visual images. Prophet Mohammed's prayer, 'My Lord! Show me the things as they are' was never so badly needed.

## Is a new Enlightenment Possible?

*The blind and the seeing are not alike,  
Nor are the depths of the darkness and the Light,  
Nor are the (chilly) shades and the (genial) heat of the sun.  
(Al-Qur'an, 35: 19-21)*

One of the curses of modern times is the mirage of perceptions. In a world of media generated illusions, man is denied the right to know, to see the things as they are. And this has led us to a total unmindfulness of the mega-crises that we live in today; the ecological threat to our planet earth and the virtual zombification of man at the hands of the capitalist monster called 'Globalization'. Man is in chains again but this time the shackles around him are not so visible. Earlier a similar situation would have caused the arrival of God's prophets to bestow on mankind the Light (of Revelation) enabling them to see the things as they are: *الهم أرني الأشياء كما هي*

The prophets of God are endowed with an extraordinary Light and vision. Those who follow them are entrusted with a new worldview or so to say experience a paradigm shift. This journey

from Darkness to Light, as the Qur'an puts it, makes the blind see and fills a dispirited soul with a new vigour of life. The hibernated human society lying low for long has witnessed time and again a renewal of life with the arrival of messengers of God. The story of Jesus as related in the Qur'an is one such instance when a prophet of God makes the spiritually blind see and brings the spiritually dead back to life. Those living on a mere material plane, unaware of noble ideals of life, undergo such a thorough transformation that they feel less linked to earth than the heaven. The Qur'an uses the parable of a bird originally made out of clay which due to a spiritual breathing into it, feels like ascending to heaven, the metaphoric abode of spiritualism. Yet at another place in Surah Al-Haj, chapter 22: verse 46, we are told that the ability to see things as they are does not depend on our mere sensory perceptions 'for it is not the eyes that are blind but the hearts which are in their breasts':

﴿فَإِنَّهَا لَا تَعْمَىٰ الْأَبْصَارُ وَلَكِن تَعْمَىٰ الْقُلُوبُ الَّتِي فِي الصُّدُورِ﴾ (الحج: 46)

Living at a temporal distance of some fourteen centuries when the last prophet of God lived amongst us, today we may have an uncomfortable feeling that the darkness has again descended on us, as it is becoming increasingly difficult to see through the machinations of modern day media images. It is an image based perception that we so conveniently carry along with us, most of our life, that for many of us seeing is what the camera wants us to see. We go where the camera goes. We have learnt so well to rely on our mere sensory perceptions that the eyes of the heart are not in operation any more. True, there lives an Ummah amongst us that considers itself rightful heir of the last prophet and claim to uphold the Last Revelation, the cure of our blinded heart –

﴿وَشِفَاءٌ لِّمَا فِي الصُّدُورِ﴾ (يونس: 57)

but they do not want to open the book themselves and are content to look at the book through the eyes of our pious elders

who are long dead and who certainly due to their ignorance of our age are incapable of telling us how to bring this Enlightenment to our context. As the Book of God remains under siege by the centuries old understanding of our Elders, the *salaf*, the Ummah, as also the rest of the world, are doomed to live in darkness taking recourse to a Crusoe-like approach, waiting for a Messiah to come.

Muslims may appear to be a dispirited nation today; they are not alone in their long wait for the messiah. In fact the messiah myth has been causing more havoc in Jewish and Christian circles than anywhere else. Christianity may boast of being the biggest religion on earth today based on the number of its adherents but the fact is that for centuries Christian ideology has been on retreat. From the Catholic faith that once commanded the society to the emergence of Liberal Capitalism, Christianity has compromised a lot, to the extent that it now allows a gay priest in office. In post-Christian West, many of us are rightly pointing out, our journey towards the long cherished human ideals of liberty and freedom has eventually brought us to a situation where we find ourselves at the mercy of Fascist Liberalism. Those who once believed that a free world based on democratic ideals was in offing and that history was travelling fast towards its ultimate end were mistaken. The end of the cold war or the drawing of the iron curtain has brought to focus more of the paradoxes of Capitalism than the disparities of the totalitarian state. Now it's no more difficult to see the inhuman face of Capitalism or what makes the US prosperous and at whose cost. The US is one third of the Indian population and yet it consumes more than one third of world resources. If the Indians aspire for a similar standard of living the rest of the globe will go starving. Sensible people around the world do not support this unethical proposition. But the yoke of Fascist Liberalism is so powerful

that not man alone feels helpless, the Evangelical Capitalism has even pressed God into its service: 'God bless America'.

The world is moving fast towards its extinction. There is no one to rein in the mad pursuit of Fascist Liberalism. There are some murmurs in the East, some small islands of protest but they are not so effective as to pose any threat to the capitalist ideology that has in a way 'globalized' the planet earth. A sense of utter helplessness that once had gripped humanity in Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy, then in localised areas, is now prevalent at a global scale.

Nevertheless, this is only one side of the picture. Blaming others for all our woes is neither fair nor can it take us anywhere. Why at all this happened that the reins of history slipped from our hands and today the entire world, including us, is at the mercy of Fascist Capitalism? This is the fundamental question that we have been shying away from for long and that deserves our serious and urgent attention.

This naturally takes us to another question. An Ummah essentially raised for global leadership and whose sole ratio legis was to benefit others, to provide direction and guidance to the entire mankind, how come they themselves became party to petty mundane conflicts? During the last many centuries the proponents of Islam envisioned it mainly in a language of resistance. Instead of presenting Islam to the world as a message of peace and mercy and ourselves as benefactors to humanity we took up the task of defending Islam. This conception of Islam in a language of resistance was a clear digression from our designated role which forced us to take a self-imposed exile from world leadership. We may boast of our selves as Ummah of the last prophet upholding the Last Revelation, yet in practical spheres we are no longer at the centre-stage. Our traditional Islamic seminaries may claim of being repositories of Revelatory knowledge yet they do not have much relevance in the modern

technological world. The world does not depend on us any more, instead, we depend on them. Our misconceptions about knowledge, i.e., considering the so-called Islamic sciences as sum total of knowledge, has permanently placed us on a slippery slope. Those who want to get rid of this situation and in their religious zeal want to turn the impossible into possible lack a proper methodology. As much of our religious literature and *responsa* of *fiqh* employ a language of resistance, they do tell us how to die for Islam but do not enlighten us as how to live for it. Then there are those amongst us who in their search for a new dawn have taken recourse to western liberal ideals. It is difficult for them to appreciate the language of resistance while on the other hand they themselves are not capable of discovering the Qur'anic paradigm of mercy. Envisioning Islam as a mere political movement has also made it difficult for us to search for the missing paradigm of mercy. Islam as a political movement, so vociferously launched in our time, mainly focused on the implementation of *Shariah* or a revival of life under the great *fiqhi* masters of the past. This conveyed to the wider world as if Islam had nothing new to offer as Muslims were not prepared to approach the Qur'an afresh. The unmindful implementation of the *Shariah* (*fiqh*) only brought to the fore a sectarian *fiqhi* vision of the bygone days. In our enthusiasm for the *Shariah* we even did not bother to check if the great masters of the past have really embodied the Qur'anic teachings or their formulations were more influenced by their own social settings. Those who wanted to draw legitimacy from the *Shariah* for their autocratic governance mainly wanted to put the *Shariah* to their service.

The *Shariah* as conceived and practiced by the Taliban, or as championed by the MMA in Pakistan or recently expounded by the Jama'at-e-Islami leadership during their all Pakistan convention has only convinced us the Islamic movements have yet to come out of the Abbasid era *fiqhi* milieu. It has not yet

been possible for them to conceive Islam in other than the language of resistance and present to the wider world the message of Islam in a broader language of common good and God's unfailing mercy. Islam, if conceived in the language of mercy, comes to us as an abode of refuge for all those distressed and broken souls in search of solace while the language of resistance gives birth to sectarian feuds even within the House of Islam. Pakistan, Tunisia, Algeria or Egypt wherever Islamic movements have employed a language of resistance it has deeply divided the Muslim society. The Islamic movement, a twentieth century phenomenon and a result of colonial onslaughts, appears to be a finished phenomenon. And the same is true of the neo-Salafis, once an advocate of creative approach to Qur'an and Sunnah, whose dependence on Ibn Taimiyah and Muhammed bin Abdulwahhab has unfortunately brought them to icon worship, or as the Qur'an puts it, to a closed-mind set:

﴿وَجَدْنَا ءَابَاءَنَا كَذٰلِكَ يَفْعَلُوْنَ﴾ (الشعراء: 73)

Our crisis is two-fold. While the world lives under a constant corrosion of Fascist capitalism the followers of the last prophet are engaged in fighting their own survival battle. Despite the presence of God's Last Revelation amongst us, our excessive dependence on the human wisdom of the past, on the interpretative works of great masters, we Muslims lack a creative and life-affirming vision of the future. Engaging with the Revelation on our own, for our specific context, is simply unthinkable even by those who otherwise go on preaching a model Islamic state. The Islamic discourse of our time which, in the words of Syed Qutb, places much emphasis on *al-mantiq al-wijdani* has left little scope for any rational or critical enquiry. To use a Kantian expression, this has nurtured amongst us a kind of a 'self-imposed immaturity' in our endeavors to engage with the Revelation. Our vision of the Revelation is that of a past experience that once had shown us our way, some fourteen

centuries ago. At most, this is only a part of our historical self, and not a felt experience. We look at the Qur'an as a repository of a great legacy of Light, and not as the Light itself. As a result, for many centuries, the Ummah is on a continuous retreat, journeying backward, from Light to Darkness.

With the darkness comes a sense of insecurity and uncertainty about the future. Once the Darkness sets in, it can only be remedied by the Light of Revelation:

﴿ ذَهَبَ اللَّهُ بِنُورِهِمْ وَتَرَكُوهُمْ فِي ظُلُمَاتٍ لَا يُبْصِرُونَ ﴾ (البقرة: 17)

The nations devoid of Divine Light have to live in constant fear of the unknown:

﴿ أَوْ كَصَيِّبٍ مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ فِيهِ ظُلُمَاتٌ وَرَعْدٌ وَنُقُرٌ ﴾ (البقرة: 19)

The sudden glimpse of light, instead of showing them the way, blocks their vision:

﴿ يَكَادُ الْبَرْقُ يَخْطَفُ أَبْصَارَهُمْ ﴾ (البقرة: 20)

Apparently it makes them see for a while, and even allows a little aimless drift, but once the light goes off they again come to a stand still. There can't be a better reflection of our situation as captured in this Qur'anic parable.

The gravity of the situation demands from us that our journey backward, from Light to Darkness, is immediately put to a halt. In the past such great tasks were performed only by the prophets. But now as no prophet is to come and the Last Revelation is like a prophet in absentia, it is for us, the followers of Mohammed, to work a new Enlightenment. As long as the Book of God is available amongst us and we have the guts and courage to engage ourselves with it, the possibility of a new Enlightenment cannot be ruled out.

The spiritual darkness that has gripped the entire world today is not idol worshipping or other superstitions. Instead, it is a sort of zombification of man, a casual living that has evolved due to our

sheer inability to see the things as they are. The media has never been so powerful and mankind never relied so heavily on continuously bombarding visual images. Prophet Mohammed's prayer, 'My Lord! Show me the things as they are' was never so badly needed. To see the things as they are demands from us that we shun all hang-ups, be they psychological, historical or religious and start depending on our mature self. This in fact needs a full-fledged Enlightenment, a Divine assistance that leaves no room for any ambiguity as promised in the Qur'an:

﴿ مَا فَرَّطْنَا فِي الْكِتَابِ مِنْ شَيْءٍ ﴾ (الأنعام: 38)

However, the Book of guidance and light (فيه هدى ونور) will create a new dawn for us only if we completely forsake worshipping the Elders and, with confidence in ourselves and hope in God's assistance, turn to God and His Revelation; for it is He alone who is protector of the believer and who delivers him from Darkness to Light:

﴿ اللَّهُ وَلِيُّ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا يُخْرِجُهُم مِّنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ ﴾ (البقرة: 257)

And it is He 'who sends His servants manifest signs, that He may lead you from the depth of Darkness into the Light' (Al-Qur'an, 57:9). Today too, if the upholders of the Last Revelation gather courage to engage with the Revelation on their own, they will find in their midst the birth of a new Enlightenment and in this process they will always find the promised help of God

﴿ هُوَ الَّذِي يُصَلِّي عَلَيْكُمْ وَمَلَائِكَتُهُ لِيُخْرِجَكُم مِّنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ وَكَانَ

بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ رَحِيمًا ﴾ (الأحزاب: 43)

True, the Ummah may have the feeling of coming to a dead-end or like prophet Jonah we might find ourselves trapped in the dark and closed belly of a fish knowing not how to get out of the situation, yet a new Enlightenment is always knocking at our

door provided that we too, like Jonah (Yunus), have the courage to confide in our Lord:

﴿فَنَادَىٰ فِي الظُّلُمَاتِ أَن لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنْتَ سُبْحَنَكَ إِنِّي كُنْتُ مِنَ الظَّالِمِينَ﴾

﴿(الأنبياء: 87)﴾

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The West is experiencing unprecedented crises of its history. Western philosophy is caught in the web of linguistic analysis, western concept of development is questioned owing to its devastating ecological effects and western ideals such as democracy have failed to establish a sane order right within the bastions of western civilizations. Today, not only the invincibility of science is being questioned, social norms involving abortion, gay marriages, and sexual ethics before marriage once taken as given have become topics of discussion again. The modern west has lost its glamour and what is in the offing is not clear yet.

## In Search of a Prophetic Voice

**A** Warner to all and the blessing for the entire world as he was, the Prophet Mohammed's message had a bearing of universality. He called for the general well being of all mankind, for the emancipation of man from man-made shakels. Islam then appeared to many as a liberating force, a gate wide open on all those seeking solace irrespective of their caste, creed, colour or race. The message of Islam coming from the mouth of the prophet then had an international appeal. It attracted nations far beyond the borders of Arabia. Sohaib of Rome, Bilal of Ethiopia, Salman of Persia saw in this struggle equally the same promise of salvific liberation that brought the local Arab population to side with the Prophet. Such then was the appeal of the prophetic voice.

Today, despite the presence of 1.6 billion followers of Mohammed on this planet, this prophetic voice is not heard of any more. Almost at all international forums of Islam, be it the OIC, the Muslim World League, the Arab League or even the conclaves of prominent Islamic organizations, one only hears

much ho-ha about uplifting the Muslim nation or way to arrest the Muslim decline but not about as how to redeem the humankind. Much to our dismay, Islam in our Age has become a communitarian project. This edition of Islam that we Muslims have developed in the course of our historical journey has no attraction for the people of other nations. Instead, they look at it as a rival ideology and a potential threat to their own hegemony. That is the basic rationale behind the American war on terror and lies at the heart of what the establishment intellectuals call the Clash of Civilizations.

Living in a post-era milieu where history has come to us as a meaningless drift, we Muslims have been picked up as a mere escape-goat. Media is continuously beaming around the world a larger than life image of the radicals amongst us who in their desperation, at times, go on ignoring the very basic teachings of Islam. Yet what makes the damage irreparable is the utter absence of the prophetic voice amongst us, that vision of global redemption that once was the hallmark of early Islam. If the moderates or other thinking Muslims limit their efforts to merely uplifting the House of Islam and the radicals work, in their own way, for the global supremacy of their cult, where would the world find the all-embracing, consoling, life-affirming and healing massage of the Last Prophet?

As long as Islam characterised submission to one Lord God, the God of all nations – رب العالمين, it was taken as a universal truth. But when we Muslims turned it into a communitarian project, it became more of an identity than the ideal, losing its appeal for others. The genesis of this transformation goes back to the formative years of the Abbasid Baghdad when our *fuqaha* canonized this universal message as the Empire's ideology. What constitutes to be a Muslim became the focus of our discussion once it became clear to us that Islam was the ideology for this part of the world alone that we, for our convenience, had come to

define as *darul-Islam*. The *ulema* of the time in their enthusiasm to put Islam at the service of the Empire vociferously demanded a commonly agreed statement of Muslim creed. Leaving the Qur'an aside that spells out what to believe in and what not, the Muslim legists went on formulating the essentials in mainstream Islam. The idea of a created Qur'an had far-reaching political implications, giving the establishment *ulema* a free-hand in further consolidating on their understanding of Islam as the Empire's ideology. The move was vehemently opposed by Ahmad bin Hambal and a host of other scholars, nevertheless, they could not help Islam being stamped as a communitarian project. Verses that left salvific possibilities open for the submitters of other nations were considered abrogated and *fugaha* took it as their prerogative to judge on sensitive issues that Qur'an had asked not to divulge in and about which we were told that God alone would decide on the Day of Judgment.

Of the Qur'an, what it means to be the word of God. Did Allah speak to Mohammed in pure Arabic? Or did he merely send down to him the 'intent'? How did it take place – the conversion of the sublime word of God into a human language? Is the Qur'an word of God in the same sense as Logos? Such questions had direct bearing on conceiving Islam as the sole heritage and ideology of the new emerging Arabian Empire. That God spoke to Mohammed in an Arabian setting but at the same time Mohammed was entrusted with a global project and his followers were commanded not to acquire any communitarian or local identity instead, submerge in the colour of God – صبغة الله – remained no more our concern. Can Islam be conceived minus Arabism? Or can the original intent of the Qur'an be deciphered beyond the linguistic construct? Such questions have bewildered many Muslims through the ages. For example, when Iqbal, the poet-philosopher of the East, saw, in the absence of the *Khilafah*, an opportunity to conceive pure Islam without the Arab cultural

elements, he was mainly voicing the hope of re-emergence of the universal message of Islam. In our time, those who find themselves mired in a host of puzzling questions about the linguistic body of the Qur'an which, owing to Deconstruction's fall-out on the linguistic theories, have made it utterly difficult for them to get to the real 'intent' and yet be sure about it. People like Mohammed Arkoun or Nasr Abu Zaid, in their curiosity to discover new meanings in the text have in fact tried to enter the meta-physical zone where being human they got bounced, nay, rather knocked down. In a way, they have brought to the fore the same age old issues that once surrounded the 'createdness' debate. Understanding a timeless document beyond time and space is ideal, but those who live only in time and space cannot simply do that. At most we can re-read the book in contemporary setting, finding new meanings that our predecessors might have missed. Yet the spatial and the temporal elements of the Prophet's time cannot be altogether peeled out from the text. What the Deconstruction Age scholars like Arkoun and his ilk are calling for is not simply a study of the text in the light of newly acquired anthropological and linguistic insights, rather in their naivety they are unsuccessfully trying to penetrate into the danger zone, trying to figure out the very process of Revelation. Yet they emerge no wiser from their lengthy discourses despite their deployment of modern linguistic theories and fashionable jargons.

In the Prophet's own time there was no dearth of curious people who wanted to gain some insights into the process of revelation. They even asked the Prophet, the Qur'an tells us, about the mystery of God's agency that brings down divine words to him. On this, the Qur'an does not elaborate much: 'they ask you, O Mohammed about the process of Revelation, say, it is by the decree of my Lord' (Qur'an, 17:85). In another context the Qur'an refers to the three modes of revelation but no further elaboration is made about the process itself. Probably God did not

like to demystify the process or it was beyond human comprehension to appreciate such a complex transformation of God's intent into a humanly comprehensible language. God alone knows the best.

A re-reading of the Qur'an beyond an Arabian setting yet not de-linking it with the spatial and temporal Arabia of the Prophet's time will have a direct bearing on the shape of Islam to come. While it is undesirable to peep into the nature of revelation it is incumbent on all of us to fix our gaze on the bubbling intent of the text and employ all available tools to strike right at the crux of the intent, transcending time and space, making journey back to the Prophet's spacia. This alone can help us in rediscover the prophetic voice.

The Qur'an is the word of God, but not the dead words; they keep growing. It is like a prism through which we can see each Age in a different light and can glean through the past and the future. This is the ratio legis of God commanding us to delve deeper into the Qur'an: 'Why don't you make serious reflections on the Qur'an, is it because you don't have a responsive heart?' (Qur'an, 47:24). Those who take the word as a finished product also feel compelled to give the text a meaning in historic setting thus becoming guilty of freezing the text as well as making the text subservient to history, basically a human tool with all its flaws. And those who approach the text as any other text suitable for sociological and anthropological dissection are equally guilty of giving undue importance to as yet to be fully developed tools for any decisive enquiry. Both the groups demand, in their own way, sole right to interpret.

The world around us is not a static place. It is continuously evolving, growing. Ignoring this fact while seizing on the interpretative opportunity is one thing and re-reading the text in our own context is something else. While the former has been instrumental in creating a totalitarian mind and tyrannical

regimes in the name of religion the latter has yet to be experimented in our time. The Temple life in Jerusalem, the rule of religious elite, was twice disrupted and it remains so till date owing to the dogmatic fixity of the Jewish mind that had transformed the universal message of God into a communitarian salvation project. And when the sins of Church fathers attained unbearable proportion and their theologians claimed sole right not only on the possibility of salvation but they even started dispensing with it, this totalitarian mindset brought the once powerful to a total ruin. No different was the fate of Ottoman Caliphate that eventually crumbled as it became hard for the bewildering Turks to figure out if they had at all a prophetic mission to carry on. History testifies to the fact that whenever proponents of religion envisioned the universal message as a communitarian project claiming the sole right to salvation for their own folk, they gradually found themselves locked in a closed system where interpretative activities had come to an end. The words of God, in all such situations, appear to them as frozen words that once had spoken to their ancestors, the pious Elders. Having lost track of the ever-engaging live words of God, the men of religion find no other alternative but to cling to the pious elders. This uncreative, unhealthy attitude creates a sense of false religiosity and at times ends up in establishing the most tyrannical regimes in the name of religion. God Almighty who sends His prophets to liberate mankind from the shakels of al-Ahbar, the misguided religious elite, has kept something inherent in all such tyrannical systems to engineer their own undoing.

The post-era sensibilities have left us with a big vacuum. The West is experiencing unprecedented crises of its history. Western philosophy is caught in the web of linguistic analysis, western concept of development is questioned owing to its devastating ecological effects and western ideals such as democracy have failed to establish a sane order right within the bastions of western

civilizations. Today, not only the invincibility of science is being questioned, social norms involving abortion, gay marriages, and sexual ethics before marriage once taken as given have become topics of discussion again. The modern west has lost its glamour and what is in the offing is not clear yet.

The last few decades have witnessed an unprecedented upsurge in interfaith gatherings. Religious people in various traditions find it hard to live in isolation or to deny salvific possibilities to the others. Amidst the murmuring of liberation theology of Latin America, Homeland theology of Taiwan, the Minjung theology of Korea and the Dalit uplift theology of India – the remnants of that old modern world, we clearly hear the hankering for a truly global theology. This concerted effort to rediscover the eternal message of God, the God of all nations, the *rabbul aalameen* as the Qur'an puts it, may bear early fruit if we Muslims wind up our communitarian Islam project inviting all nations on this planet to sing the praise of Lord God in unison:

*'Praise be to Lord, the Lord of all nations,  
The Merciful, the Mercy-giving,  
Master of the Day of Judgment.  
O Lord! To You we worship and from You we seek support.  
Guide us to the right way,  
The way of those on whom You bestowed your blessings  
And not of those on whom your wrath fell  
And not of those who went astray.'*

(Al-Qur'an, 1: 1-6)



Islamic scholars have usually taken reason as opposite to revelation. They came to believe that rational knowledge and revelatory knowledge do not come from the same source as one is based on observation and the other on intuition. Contrary to this attitude, the Qur'an, the main source of the revelatory knowledge among the Muslims, invites people, oft and on, to think and observe. The Qur'an wants us to lay down the basis of revelatory knowledge on rational thinking. The Qur'an itself is a rational discourse which calls upon us to be more reflective than dogmatic.

## Beyond an Islamic Reformation

From Makkah to Washington DC Islamic Reformation is the buzz word. Though the reform movement is no new innovation in Islam, nevertheless, the rallying cry for reforming Islam from within had never attained such a high pitch. And despite the fact that reformation has an Islamic basis, the external pressure to do so has cast a shadow of doubt on the nature of the reform itself. Then, there are intellectuals in the west, whose advocacy for reform is not to make Islam more compatible with our time but to tame it, thereby creating a version of Islam that may fit into the liberal western framework. The way they did it with Christianity and Judaism. If the followers of Islam feel at home in the citadel of Evangelical Capitalism, it is assumed, the West will lose its most dreaded enemy.

Another variety of reformers includes Muslim scholars who have been trained and educated in the West. This category of Muslim intellectuals look at themselves as a natural extension of great reformers of the past such as Ibne Hazm, Daoud Zaahri, Ibn

Taimiya, Abu Hamid Ghazali, Mohammad bin Abdulwahhab, Waliullah al-Dahlavi and the like. And if in the past Muslims had acceded to carry on Islamic reform, they argue, there is no reason that they should object to it in the new situation. However, the mega question still remains unanswered. If our reformers in the past were unable to achieve the required result how can one guarantee that the modern reformers would achieve it today. For the last many centuries Muslim reformers have been calling for a return to the Qura'n and Sunnah, for constructing anew the tattered worldview of Islam. Yet no return to the pristine purity of Islam appears in sight. We must focus our attention on the stumbling blocks that have been turning thus far all our initiatives into non-starters. The new reformers have a double task; firstly, to pin-point precisely the failures of their predecessors and secondly, to devise a viable methodology and appropriate tools for rediscovering Islam in its true colours, transcending historical Islam and the human interpretations around it. An open debate questioning almost every thing under the sky in true Qur'anic paradigm alone holds promise of rediscovering that great Islamic sensibility which if properly unveiled today could create an unprecedented revolution.

Before we proceed further let us make an honest confession. If our reformers in the past failed to rediscover Islam in its true colours it was mainly because they, despite their desperate willingness to travel back in time and space to the prophet's Medina, failed to realize that the journey demanded from them a new methodology of enquiry and investigation. They wanted to return to pure Islam employing a *fiqhi* methodology of their choice. Probably, they lacked the courage that was needed to put aside the historical baggage and intellectual garbage that had accumulated during centuries of interpretive activities. An open investigation into the great *fuqaha* and their methodology were considered as 'security zones' that were conveniently to be left

out of the focus of our discussion. To be a Hanafite or a Shafeite was considered crucial for being a Muslim and hence it became simply unthinkable to imagine Islam without its great teachers, the *fuqaha*. Even Iqbal, the poet philosopher of the East, who by virtue of being a distinguished scholar of the Qur'an was no less a *mujtahid*, found it convenient to stick to the Hanafi School of jurisprudence. He once declared that for practical convenience he had adopted the Hanafi fiqh. Be they the Qur'anic exegetes of repute or other champions of Islamic reform, it was not possible for them to fashion out an Islamic identity without a *fiqhi* tag. The rediscovery of Qur'anic intent and a return to Qur'anic *weltanschauung* remained elusive. And the disturbing question, nonetheless, kept us haunting: why, despite being the Last Ummah assigned to lead humanity till End times, do we find ourselves on the margins of history?

Today, no doubt, Islamic reform stands a better chance. Firstly, it has become clear to us all that the worn out *fiqhi* methodology of the past and outdated tools of inquiry cannot impart to us a true understanding of the changed realities. Secondly, the movement for Islamic revival so vociferously launched in Muslim lands and later exported to the West has miserably failed. Harping on the same string or employing the same methodology can in no way guarantee a future. Thirdly, as the things radically changed around us; the creation of a virtual world on the internet and the implied smallness of the globe have further emphasized that no isolationist strategy would survive in the future. It is no more possible for any religion to work for its salvation in isolation. Fourthly, Muslim intellectuals of our time have come to realize that if today Muslim strategists lack a direction and leadership it is mainly because the shape of Islam that has come down to us is more a product of history than the divine revelation. Purging the human or historical elements is a must if we want to achieve the same result that the sublime revelation had achieved during the

Prophet's time. Fifthly, living in the borderless world of the internet has positively influenced our communitarian sensibilities. Being the followers of an international prophet we aspire, at heart, to become an all-embracing Ummah working for the betterment of entire humanity, yet we find ourselves trapped in the psychological shell of our own making, the cult of the *Ummah Muhammadiya*. In our time Muslim intellectuals and ulema have come to realize that for centuries their segregated living in the supposed *darul-Islam* and their involvement in exclusively communitarian projects have deprived them of their true prophetic moorings, of being a source of mercy and blessings for all. This metamorphosis of an international Ummah into a cult has come under serious investigation today. And the need for rediscovering the Qur'anic intent and reconstruction of a global Muslim outlook has attained urgency. Amidst great hopes and optimism lurks the danger; if a proper methodology is not put forth the opportunity to rediscover Islam in its true colours may slip from our hands once again, leaving the humanity directionless for a few more centuries to come.

## Methodology for Reform

The Reform Movement has not to reform Islam as such, rather, it has to purge the human, interpretative elements that have overshadowed the true colours of Islam. Islam is a divine message but it is a paradox that it has to be interpreted by the human mind. We are not against the involvement of the human mind as such, on the contrary, we call for making this involvement a continuing process. Great minds of the past have done their job and now it is for us to work out our own Enlightenment. A new beginning has to be made. And it has to be different from the past if we want to avoid the pitfalls of the past reformers. Here are some suggestions:

1. The new reformers must avoid value loaded terminologies such as 'Reformation' or 'Enlightenment'. There is a real danger that a reform movement itself is swayed by the cultural and historical connotations of these terms. In the west reformation speaks of a process of undoing church tyranny and a head-on collision with rational thinking. A semblance of this situation is not found in Muslim history where both the *Ahbar* of Islam and the ruling elite have continuously faced organized dissent legitimized by the *Shariah*. Those who call for the emergence of a Luther or a Calvin amongst us are in fact unaware of Muslim history and the liberating message of the Qur'an. The same can be said about the term Enlightenment. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno have blamed Enlightenment for the Holocaust. Isaiah Berlin levels similar charges of totalitarian tendencies lurking in the Enlightenment which not only produced Holocaust but also the communist tyranny, the Gulag. The story does not end here. Owing to the western experiment of Enlightenment some great minds of the West, such as Jefferson, Kant and Hume, came to believe in the supposed superiority of the white race. It was Enlightenment that eventually created the 'stupid white men' and armed them with ideological and scientific justification for colonizing 'the other'. The new reformers of Islam must handle such terminologies with utmost caution.
2. No doubt Luther who made a dent on Christian thinking for all time to come had rightly argued that scripture should be the final authority, that the mandate of God must stand supreme to the mandate of fallen humans. In the medieval Christian context, it was a revolutionary Idea. There is nothing wrong in learning from the Lutheran experience. Nevertheless, Muslim reformers of today must not lose sight

of the fact that the Qur'an is not a mere scripture in the Christen sense of the term and hence cannot be handled just like any other scripture. Here each word is definite and is preserved in the original language, the way it was sent down to the prophet Mohamed, in verbatim. Reforming Islam from within simply amounts to purging the human interpretative elements in it and not in any case the intent itself.

3. Islamic scholars have usually taken reason as opposite to revelation. They came to believe that rational knowledge and revelatory knowledge do not come from the same source as one is based on observation and the other on intuition. Muslim *ulema* have always attached more importance to the revelatory knowledge than the observatory Knowledge. Contrary to this attitude, the Qur'an, the main source of the revelatory knowledge among the Muslims, invites people, oft and on, to think and observe. The Qur'an wants us to lay down the basis of revelatory knowledge on rational thinking. The Qur'an itself is a rational discourse which calls upon us to be more reflective than dogmatic. Even the most essential creed of Islam such as the oneness of God, the belief in the hereafter and in the agency of prophet hood are not spared of this discourse. It is a great dichotomy of the human mind that despite its limitation it has been assigned to appreciate the cosmos thereby leading to an enlightened understanding about the creator. Throughout the process it is very much possible to commit mistakes and at the same time learn from them. The great *ulema* and *fuqaha* of the past were also humans like us. No wonder then if they made mistakes or could not envision our modern context in their *fiqhi* formulations. We are not supposed to carry on the burden of others' mistakes; we have enough of our own share.

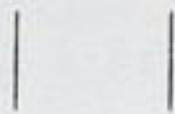
4. *Tagleed*, the blind following and Reform cannot go hand in hand, nor can they together pave way for Enlightenment. There is certainly no harm in learning from the past masters but we should not insist on getting to the same results. If we feel obliged at the outset to come out with the same result the entire reform activity would be a waste of time and energy, a lifeless imitation of the past. With the utmost purity of mind and heart at our command we are equally capable of engaging with the Revelation as our Elders did in the past. We should also bear in mind that revelatory and observatory knowledge are not opposed to each other, they, in fact, complement each other. True knowledge is always reflective, a combination of the two. It is more of a Buddhist bodhi than what is generally termed as Enlightenment. Reflective knowledge has no dogmatic fixity nor is it a directionless drift characterized by the western enlightenment whose logical destination is post-modernism.
5. There were some 'security zones', some sensitive questions beyond any investigation and enquiry which the past reformers did not consider appropriate to divulge in. For example, knowing well that owing to different *fiqhi* schools of their own making the Ummah is split from within, yet none dared to challenge the ratio legis of various *fiqhi* schools. Each wanted to achieve broader Islamic unity within the given *fiqhi* framework. Some even made us believe that the four conflicting schools of sunni Islam are a divinely ordained arrangement to provide us with a selection of choice. This is no different from the popular Christian notion that the writings of Paul that now forms part of the canonized text are divinely inspired. The new reformers of Islam have a daunting task ahead. They need to bring the entire heritage literature under intense investigation. Except the last Revelation that has come

down to us through Prophet Mohamed no inspired words of any individual or scholarly interpretation of any Imam could form the basis of Islamic canon. Unless we are really able to shake up the very basis of *fiqhi* division and uproot the alien *fiqhi* institutions of *ahbar-al-Islam*, a return to pure Islam will remain elusive.

6. For centuries we Muslims have been living in a psychological ghetto of our own making. As the *Ummah Muslimah* we were entrusted with world leadership but we preferred to recast ourselves as *Ummah Muhammadiyah*, the cult of Mohammed. We were supposed to be a source of mercy and blessings for entire humanity. But the emergence of a cultic thinking amongst us has made it very difficult for us to look beyond our noses. The ghetto mind-set has transformed the once revolutionary Ummah of Islam from within. Swayed by some popular but fabricated traditions we even came to believe that the Prophet Mohammed, a blessing for the entire mankind and a Warner to all as he is projected in the Qur'an, was only worried about his own folks and that the last words he uttered on his death bed were *ummati, ummati* (my folk, my folk). The Qur'anic basis of a global agenda, the *kalimatun siwaen* demands from us that we shed the isolationist mind-set. Each and every effort to create a better world deserves our attention. They are very much part of our agenda and deserve our pro-active participation.
7. It is high time to question each and every bit of our heritage literature. There is nothing beyond criticism except the words of God and the proven Sunnah of the Prophet. There are no security zones for worn out dogmatic beliefs and no issues beyond the scope of rational investigation. Unless we put the entire historical Islam under intense scrutiny we cannot pin-pointedly say where we went wrong.

8. If *Ijma* or conventional Islamic practice does not properly fit into Qur'anic weltanschauung, the former must be done away with. *Ijma* or supposed consensus is a false metaphor. No *Ijma* has ever taken place on any single issue save it is directly derived from the book of God and the Sunnah of his prophet. An *Ijma* without a proper rational discourse cannot claim any legitimacy whatsoever. To believe that consensus of the great masters of the past has decided some issues for all time and the issue is now closed for discussion is a product of a slave mind-set so vociferously condemned in the Qur'an.
9. The words of God and the wise counsels of our Ulema are two different things altogether. While the former commands our unfailing respect the latter is a human creation. In other words, the intent of *Shariah* as expounded in books of *fiqh* may not command the same degree of respect than that enshrined in the book of God. We must distinguish between the dictates of God and the edicts of humans.

In a society where an open debate on issues of vital import has been closed for centuries it is not easy to make a new beginning. It amounts to transforming the society from within, journeying from a closed to an open society. This indeed is a daunting task. But there is no other way out.



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## Reconstructing the *Ummah Muslimah*

Islam is not an identity that a group can claim on its sole patent rather, it is an attitude of willing and unconditional submission to God, a door open on all those seeking solace in the oneness of God. This call for willing submission, expressed throughout history by the true prophets of God and their rightful followers, has to be carried forward by the Muslims of our time. However, this does not imply that submitters in other prophetic traditions will be denied a role in this modern day venture. A movement calling for world revolution, for establishing a global family comprising of the children of one God cannot afford to shut its door on the submitters found in other traditions.

No objective reading of the Qur'an can miss the dominant theme that all the prophets of God, from Abraham to Mohammed or before them, were calling people to worship one God, to embrace the life example of submitters, the Muslim *haneef*. No wonder then that the Qur'an makes it a precondition of faith to believe in all the prophets one and at the same time. The believers are asked to look at the prophets not as the

founders of a specific Ummah but as upholders of the same divine mission: لا نفرق بين احد منهم. In the divine scheme they are inseparable; together they constitute a galaxy of divinely inspired leaders of humanity. They are not to be understood in isolation. The Qur'an makes it an inseparable part of the Muslim faith to believe in all the earlier prophets and what has come down to us through them. The remnants of the earlier prophetic communities, we are told, are our natural allies. Since Mohammed has not brought a new message rather he came to revive the Abrahamic religion, believers are encouraged to find in him the convergence of the entire prophetic tradition.

Mohammed founded no new Ummah. Instead, far from a new identity or a name, the new believers were asked to shun every pseudo religious identity, be it Jewish or Christian. All those claiming to be the true inheritors of Abrahamic heritage from among the Jews and Christians or adamant on converting people to their bandwagon were told in clear terms that there was no goodness attached to mere labels. Far from being a Jew or a Christian, Abraham was a submitter per se. Hence all those willing to submit to one Lord must follow his example (Qur'an, 2:135). Had Mohammed and his followers taken a new identity as opposed to the Jewish or Christian this move would certainly have undermined his position as the prophet to humanity. As opposed to those calling for conversion to Jewish or Christian fold كونا هودا او نصارى the new believers had to stick to the Abrahmic fold: 'the true religion of Abraham who worshiped no God other than Him' (Qur'an, 6:161). Contrary to the Jews and Christians who attached so much importance to their religious tags, the new believers were to march through history tag-free. The Qur'anic invitation of كونا ربانيين of urging people to be a God-based Ummah or taking the color of God, صبغة الله was to drive home the same point that no prophet ever in history came to establish his own cult or invited people to submit to his own

self. The Qur'an tells us, time and again, that all the prophets, despite their geographical and temporal difference, in essence had preached the same message (Qur'an, 3:68). And since Mohammed represents the essence of Abrahamic tradition where else one would find a model to emulate? (Qur'an, 3:68)

Mohammed thus projected in the Qur'an is no cult leader. He is a global prophet; a Warner to all *كافة للناس بشيرا ونذيرا* and a blessing for all mankind *رحمة للعالمين*. In the early era of Islam one even does not hear of the term *Ummah Mohammadiya* same as in the hey day of earlier prophetic communities the cultic identity like the Jew, the Christian or the Buddhist was not known. It took almost centuries for these personality based identities to evolve. All the true prophets of God did their best to connect to people to one God, to raise a just society centered around God alone *لا شريك له في* and to unite people in *tawhidi* paradigm as children of one God. The prophet is no ordinary seer; he is endowed with a cosmic knowledge and a meta-cosmic vision *الكتاب والحكمة*. It is not expected of him to indulge in cult formation or call people to worship his own cult 'كونوا عبادا لي' whereas he is assigned to call people to worship one God or identify themselves as none but His slaves alone *كونوا ربانيين* (Qur'an, 3: 79). Like the submitters of all time the new believing community too, we are told, were to accept all the prophets as a pre-condition to their faith. They would not even prefer one prophet over the other (Qur'an, 3: 84).

Revival of a universal *Ummah* based on God alone was no ordinary vision; the rallying cry for becoming *rabbani* or a general invitation for plugging in to God created an extraordinary amount of energy and ecstasy. As long as the new believers remained conscious of their *rabbani* identity they looked at themselves as a convergence of great prophetic tradition. They were like an open door wherein all souls seeking solace would find refuge. This extraordinary emphasis on God based identity gave the new believers an ideological edge and soon transformed

them into a power to reckon with. Though rooted in Arab traditions their changed outlook had such a great impact that wherever they went they appeared as a group of people united around one God and for whom the racial, cultural, linguistic and geographical identities had lost all meaning. However, as the era of first generation Muslims passed by, gradually an impression got underway as if the Arab culture was the natural color of Islam. Some even considered the grandeur of the Abbasid Empire as the logical destination of the *rabbani* movement. The Arab bias or *asabiyah* became a norm for the later Muslims to emulate. Further, the degeneration of the *mawaali* institution, from a brotherly corporation into a social protectorate, also made us believe that hence onward non-Arabs had to limit themselves only to the periphery of the Islamic movement. An empire founded on the Arab *asabiyah* claiming the superiority of some Arab clans left little room for the remnants of other prophetic communities to join in. The once God oriented vision embracing all was now transformed into the idea of a community centered around the personality of a prophet. This was a clear case of misplaced loyalty, or what is termed as the *ghuloo* in Qur'anic terminology. The idea of a new Ummah centered around an Arab prophet, reduced the new believers to the status of just another community, and like the Jews and the Christians, yet another slice of the great Abrahmic loaf. This process of the closing of the Muslim mind not only transformed them from within, it also changed the entire world around them.

The Ummah was now on a course of perpetual decline and its *ulema* had taken an intellectual exile. However, the so called golden age of Abbasid Baghdad, or the splendor of Muslim Spain and Mughal India and the military prowess of the Ottoman Empire created some illusions to cover up our ever declining graph. It was a process through which the Muslim nation, the *Ummah Muhammadiyah* had defeated Islam. The very emergence

of cult Islam, or Muhammadan nation, had in fact sounded the death knell of an ideology based Ummah. The color of God no more remained the only identity of Muslims. Forced to take shelter in the psychological prison house of their own making, Muslims made Ummah the main focus of their concern, nay rather object of worship. The cult worship further degenerated into sub-cults and the new believers found new identities to cling to. Internal feuds between the Shiites and Sunnis, Hanafis and Shafeis, not only engineered the fall of Mohammedan Empires, it caused so much ideological confusion that it became almost impossible to figure out who really was the true representative of Islam. That something had gone awry with the House of Islam was a general feeling however those who came to repair the situation focused mainly on the reorientation of the *Ummah Muhammadiyah* itself. What had been the main cause of its ailment came to be regarded as its cure.

Instead of employing the cultic notion of *Ummah Mohammadiyah* the Qur'an uses the term *Ummah Mislimah*. In Abraham's moving prayer one hears him saying: 'Our Lord! Make us submitters to you and raise from among our children a nation of submitters, امة مسلمة لك (Qura'an, 2:128). Abraham enjoined upon his sons and so did Jacob: 'my sons! Die not except in the state of submission' (Qur'an, 2:133). The Qur'anic vision of *Ummah Muslimah* comprises all those submitters no matter in which geographical, historical or civilizational slot they are found. It is a glittering galaxy of all the prophets and their true followers. The people of Cave whom God blessed and protected, female role models such as Mary (Jesus' mother) and Pharaoh's wife and all other believing nations mentioned in the Qur'an or left unmentioned, together they constitute the broader Ummah of Islam. Despite these clear pronouncements if there still are people who insist that Abraham was a Jew or a Christian, the Qur'an challenges their misconceptions: 'say! You know better or God?'

(Qur'an, 2:140). Calling Abraham a Jew or looking at Mohammed as the founder of *Ummah Mohammediyah* tantamount to great injustice: 'And who is more unjust than those who conceal the testimony they have from Allah?' (Qur'an, 2:140). And those who still insist that the present day *Ummah Mohammediyah* constitutes the sum total of *Ummah Muslimah* can they dare expel Abraham and his progeny or Aasiya and Mary from the Islamic fold? Salvation for Submitters alone: Those who submit themselves to the Lord Almighty and make right moves need not worry about their salvation. This is the assurance given to all those who submit to one Lord thereby constituting the broader Ummah of submitters. On the contrary those born in the Muslim tradition and even raised in the family of submitters if they recourse to non-Abrahmic way, this assurance is immediately withdrawn:

﴿لَقَدْ كَفَرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ﴾ (المائدة: 17)

or

﴿لَقَدْ كَفَرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ ثَالِثُ ثَلَاثَةٍ﴾ (المائدة: 73)

Such and the like verses are clear indications that mere group identity is no good for salvation nor any blood relation with a group of submitters or *Ummah Muslimah* can be a sufficient ground for it. This is why the Jewish and the Christian claim -- the traditional Muslims of Mohammad's time -- that they were the darling children of God, the chosen ones, was out rightly dismissed (Qur'an, 5:18).

That the Qur'anic term *Ummah Muslimah* is a broad based House of submitters can further be asserted by a re-reading of Surah Ambiya where we are assured once again: 'Verily this Ummah of yours is a single Ummah and I am your Lord and Cherisher, therefore worship me' (21/91). It is a long chain of submitters from Abraham to Lot down to Solomon, Jacob, Ishmael, Idrees, Zulkifl, Zunnoon, Zachariah, Yahya and Mary. All of them in fact constitute one single group though their later

generation might have divided themselves among different groupings: *وتقطع امرهم بينهم* (Qur'an, 21:93). There are numerous verses in the Qur'an emphasizing that all those submitting to one God constitute one Ummah as opposed to those who get trapped in sectarian thinking or take refuge in cult worship. The Qur'anic verdict that this set of people are one nation (Qur'an, 2:213) or this Ummah of yours is one Ummah (Qur'an, 21:92) can better be explained by yet another expression: 'Abraham alone constitutes an Ummah' *ان ابراهيم كان امة*, the same Abraham who is projected as a role model for Muslims of all time. Abraham's submission is beyond all doubts as he never created a cult of his own nor he was the originator of the Jewish or Christian identity. Those who follow him will have to be an integral part of the greater Ummah of Islam.

This broader view of the *Ummah Muslimah* was in operation in the hay day of Islam. Even during the dangerous times of war and fierce struggle when Muslims had to face open opposition from Jewish and Christian quarters the vision of the broader Ummah of Islam remained intact. For we are warned in the Qur'an, time and again, not to fall prey to generalization. There are still many among the people of the book sticking to the truth:

﴿وَمِنْ قَوْمِ مُوسَى أُمَّةٌ يَهْدُونَ بِالْحَقِّ﴾ (الأعراف: 159)

Among them are also God fearing nice souls who stand all night long reciting the word of God and prostrating themselves in adoration (Qur'an, 3:113). As a group identity is not a source of salvation it cannot be an excuse for condemnation either. Those among you who are more God conscious are more 'worthy in the sight of God (Qur'an, 49:13) On that day every soul will have to carry his own burden alone (Qur'an, 74:38). Such verses then, are sufficient pointers to the fact that submitters to God together constitute one nation and for them God's favor is guaranteed: 'Those who believe and those of the Jews and Christians and the Sabians who believe in Allah and the last day and work

righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve' (Qur'an 2:62). This verse of the Qur'an extending scope of salvation to the followers of other prophets, to the submitters of other faith groups, has been an enigma to many Muslim Ulema and jurists and a matter of irreconcilable controversy. While Abu Hamid Ghazali, Rashid Radha and Tabatabaei believed that God's mercy would be extended to the submitters of other faith groups, for an overwhelming majority of Muslim scholars this notion was no less than a blasphemy. Where then does Muhammed stand in the scheme of things? They quipped. The more Muslims started looking at Mohammed as the founder of a new Ummah it became increasingly difficult for them to find in him the convergence of the great Abrahmic tradition. They also lost sight of the fact that Islam, the chosen *deen* of God propagated by all true prophets throughout history, is essentially a God-centered religion. It was St. Augustine's hand in theology that made salvation almost impossible without Jesus. Those who fashion Mohammed in similar light or place him on a much higher pedestal of intercession, are in fact guilty of operating within an Augustinian framework. As opposed to Augustinian Christianity where salvation is the sole right of Christians, the Qur'an discourages humans to pass strictures on this sensitive issue. We have to keep our mouths shut not only about the people of the book who are taken as our natural allies, but even about those who are guilty of committing Shirk. It is God's prerogative, we are told: 'on that day God will bring forth His verdict about them' (Qur'an, 22:17). Same as God created people in different clans and races so that they can be mutually recognized (Qur'an, 49:13), it is also His scheme that his obedient children are known with varying labels. 'Had God so willed', we are told, 'He would have raised us as one Ummah' but it is His plan to test us in what has come down to us. We are therefore exhorted to mutually compete in acts of

goodness (Q 5:48). If submitters to one God find themselves in divergent traditions of submission this diversity should not be cause for worry. The Qur'an testifies to the fact that the Torah and *Injil* have come down from the same source and there too one may find guidance and light. Those claiming to inherit different prophetic traditions should not sink so low in their disputes as to indulge in deciding who is going to hell or who can be sure of salvation. Instead, what all we are required is to strive in a stiff competition of virtues; for God alone is the goal of us all, it is He who will show us the truth of the matters in which we dispute' (Qur'an, 5:48). Having been aware of the unique position of Mohammed in history, the first generation of Muslims never divulged in such issues. Instead, they considered the remnants of earlier prophets as their natural ideological allies with whom a common program of action could be worked out: 'O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than God (Qur'an, 3:64). Assigned to a leadership role as they were, the earlier Muslims displayed a marked openness in embracing submitters of different hue to their fold. The door of the new Islamic movement was open on all those willing to compete in acts of goodness. However, those still trapped in sectarian thinking or who attached undue importance to their Jewish or Christian identity, they were reminded that they will find no reward for them unless they stick to the teachings of Torah (Qur'an, 5:68). Though claiming to be representative of Jewish or Christian faith, they are the people who have taken their identity as God and sunken in cult worship. No good is expected from such closed minded people. Hence it is advisable to stay away from them: 'O submitters! Take not the Jew and Christians for your friends and protectors' (Qur'an, 5:51). Such and the like pronouncements however should not be taken as a

general statement. For we are reminded in the Qur'an: 'Not all of them are alike: of the people of the Book are an upright Ummah, they recite the words of God all night long and they prostrate themselves in adoration' (Qur'an, 3:113). Since the early Muslims considered the people of the book as their natural ally, they found no fault in socially mixing with them. The Qur'an had allowed their food lawful for Muslims. And same as Muslim men were encouraged to take believing women as their wife on condition of piety so they were also allowed to marry with chaste women from among the people of the book (Qur'an, 5:5). In a God-centered society founded on *taqwa* alone where the call for becoming *rabbani* or God-oriented had attained such a high pitch none could even have dreamt that one day the same people would undergo such a through transformation that it would be difficult for them to look at themselves as upholder of the *rabbani* identity and being Muslims would come to be regarded as wearing a cultural identity rather than the pure unconditional submission. Owing to some historical factors and political upheavals, unfortunately this great tragedy befell on Muslims. Gradually the Muslim national identity took precedence over their *rabbani* identity. This initiated the process of the closing of the Muslim mind. Soon Muslims found themselves surrounded with a plethora of doubtful historical material and unreliable traditions that had to shape the new Muslim identity in the centuries to come.

This transformation of a people entrusted to lead history till end time, from *Ummah Muslimah* into *Ummah Muhammadiyah*, gave birth to a whole new set of beliefs about the Ummah and its prophet. Like the other earlier nations Muslims too prided themselves on their cultic identity and projected their prophet as super prophet. What as upholder of the Qur'an they once had found it difficult to swallow the illogical claim of the Jews that no fire will touch them except for a short period and that heaven is

their eventual destination irrespective of what they do, now they had developed same fancies about themselves. In the legends that shaped the new Muslim mind Muhammed is seen as having exceptional ability to intercede to win the salvation of his Ummah. On that appointed day when Abraham, Moses, Jesus and other prophets will shy away from taking up a single case of intercession, Mohammed upholding the banner of God's praise will be able to send his own folk en masse to heaven. Some traditions even relate that given the mass entry of Muslims to heaven there would be a general feeling that Mohammed's Ummah as a whole is being treated like the Israelite prophets. The envisioning of an unjust God and an equally partial prophet left Muslims with no choice but to take shelter in the psychological shell of their own making. This was a great mistake. By projecting Mohammed as the super prophet they in fact painted him as a cult hero. All those who were passionately eulogizing him as the great hero of Mohammedan Ummah were in fact pouring on him insult of the worst kind. The great international prophet whom the Qur'an depicts as a blessing to all mankind, about him we were told by the fabricators that when his end came he was only worried about his own folk. On his death bed he muttered *ummati ummati* and on the Day of Judgment too, as the traditions has it, he will maneuver God's judgment in favor of his own people. If the prophet is seen as one working for *Ummah Muhammadiyah* alone how can one expect from his followers that they will mirror themselves as Warner to all or work for the general good of humanity.



The first generation Muslims were not even aware of the term *Ilm Sharei*, which has gained common currency among scholars of our time. The *ulema*, as we know them today with a distinct identity and a dress-code were not known to us at least till the end of the first century Hijra. Qazi Abu Yusuf is said to be the first *aalim* to help invent a special dress for himself and for the other *ulema* in the Abbasid courts. Gradually, this special dress with some modifications became the hallmark of our *ulema*.

## Calling for a Paradigm Shift

At the outskirts of Riyadh, en route to the airport, there lies a huge complex of fortress-like structures. This is the famous Imam University known for higher education in Islamics. The Imam University is not the only seat of learning specialising in Islamic education, or the *Uloom Sharei* as they call it. There is an equally famous university in Medina as also the famed Al-Azher Shareef in Cairo and a host of such institutions throughout the Muslim world devoted to Islamic learning. The other end of the Saudi capital houses yet another university, the King Saud, which specialises in modern secular education alone. Situated on the two sides of the same city though, the two universities help shape entirely different worldviews. This is no exaggeration to say that people on the two campuses live in entirely different worlds. At the Jamia Imam the sum total of knowledge is *Ilm Sharei*, the religious sciences. Here the secular knowledge holds no legitimacy whatsoever. On the other hand the scholars at the King Saud believe that they have nothing to do with the religious sciences. This misconception about the very nature of knowledge or its classification into Islamic and un-

Islamic has created split personalities among Muslims. Those belonging to the secular stream of education have this awful feeling that their efforts might not be beneficial to them in the hereafter. While on the other hand, scholars in the religious seminaries live under the illusion that they, being religious scholars, are heirs to the Prophet and that they alone are in the possession of true knowledge.

The idea of a full-fledged university for imparting 'Islamic' education though now quite an established tradition, does not conform to the holistic concept of knowledge in Islam. Even before the colonial period our traditional ulema did not believe in such a narrow definition of *Ilm Sharei*. As long as Muslim empires survived in any form our religious seminaries made it a point to include most contemporary subjects in their syllabus so as to produce competent men for the system. In the famous *dars nizami* (the Nizamia syllabus of the sub-continent that traces its origin in the 18th century) the inclusion of existing books on Logic, Mathematics, Physics etc is indicative of the fact that the very syllabus that appears to be so irrelevant today wore a modern outlook in its own time. But once the ulema came to believe that after the fall of the Muslim empires the only role left for them was to preserve Islamic heritage and pass on Islamic understanding to the subsequent generations, a psychology of resistance gripped them. This did not happen in one day. The genesis of this misconception about the nature of knowledge can be traced back to the second century Hijra when the ever-widening scope of the newly developed *uloom naqaliyya* – the sciences of collection and critical appraisal of traditions – had attained undue prominence, a point I shall later return to.

The proponents of *Uloom Sharei* argue that the Muslim society after all needs Moazzins and Imams, scribes and preachers and those experts in Islamic *fiqh* who can teach young boys and girls Islamic etiquette and methods to attain hygienic purity. But to

achieve this target do we really need full length courses spanning from ten to fifteen years? However, if our religious seminaries intend to produce such people who can provide able leadership and guidance for the modern world, this certainly cannot be achieved by institutions where a medieval feel is very much part of the syllabus.

What is knowledge? What is the Qur'anic definition of a true scholar (*al-rasikhoon fil Ilm*)? Such questions need to be addressed afresh. The one who knows and the one who does not are by no standard on the same footing (Qur'an, 39:9). In the Qur'anic *weltanschauung* revelation and reason are the two basic sources of knowledge. While revelation serves as the guiding light, reason works as the basic tool of analysis. The one complements the other. Those endowed with a pure heart and a sound mind take heed from various signs of God. They reflect on the coming down of rain from the sky, the varieties of colourful produce from the same soil and the colour scheme at work amongst men and animals. The more they reflect and ponder on the universe the more they are astounded by the awe of God. Truly, they are the men of knowledge among His servants, we are told in the Qur'an (35:28).

In the Qur'an the Prophet is the ultimate teacher who recites to the people the verses of divine origin to purify them and to educate them in the Book and wisdom (Qur'an, 2: 129 & 151). The very mention of *hikmah* or wisdom as a natural corollary to the Book of God is indicative of the fact that a rational outlook is the key to proper understanding of the Book. What is *hikmah* (wisdom) and why it is so that the Qur'an mentions it alongside the Book and in the same breath? Some of the traditional commentators of the Qur'an have mistaken it as yet another word for Sunnah. However, a close reading of all such verses where the word *hikmah* occurs tells us an altogether different story. Unlike Sunnah, *hikmah* is not a phenomenon that achieved

its perfection and came to an end with the death of the Prophet. Rather, it is an ongoing process of mental alertness. There are numerous verses in the Qur'an that testify to this meaning. For example, relating to the story of David we are told that he was endowed with political power and wisdom (Qur'an, 2:251). And Allah grants *hikmah* to whom He pleases (Qur'an, 2:269). That *hikmah* is not be confused with the Prophet's sunnah can also be deduced from the Qur'anic assertion that earlier nations, the nation of Abraham for instance, were also recipients of *hikmah* (Qur'an, 4:54). In yet another context, Muslims are enjoined to employ *hikmah* and politeness in inviting people to God. In short, in the Qur'anic weltanschauung *hikmah* is a rational attitude nurtured in the individual right under the guidance of revelation. Where pure reason fails, it comes to our rescue. Luqman is such a great seer, a perfect blend of the two who finds special mention in the Qur'an. Revelation and reason together thus make a balanced personality, 'a sound heart', as the Qur'an puts it (26:89).

It was this balanced rational outlook that once placed the Ummah on the high pedestal of world leadership. Muslims became instrumental in creating a whole new world founded on rational thinking. In the hey days of Islam, it never occurred to us that as Muslims we were to limit ourselves to the so called *uloom sharei* alone. On the contrary, the first generation Muslims were not even aware of the term 'Ilm Sharei', which has gained common currency among scholars of our time. In early Islam it was unthinkable that any group of people would claim to be an authority in religious sciences. The ulema, as we know them today with a distinct identity and a dress-code were not known to us at least till the end of the first century Hijra. Qazi Abu Yusuf is said to be the first *aalim* to help invent a special dress for himself and for the other ulema in the Abbasid courts. Gradually, this special dress with some modifications became the hallmark of our ulema. The same age also witnessed the emergence of great *fuqaha*

and *muhaddithoon*. And it was during this period that the *muhaddithoon* attained social and intellectual prominence. As collectors of Prophetic traditions, a fast vanishing discipline, they even commanded more respect than the scholars of the Qur'an. It was during this period that those who engaged themselves in gathering, preserving and transmitting historical reportage of import came to be known as scholars. Later, this misconception about the nature of scholarship paved way for the division of *Ilm* (knowledge) into *uloom naqaliyyah* (transmitted knowledge) and *uloom aqaliyyiah* (rational knowledge), the former being the *Ilm Sharei* having its origin in the divine words and where reason had no role to play. As compared to the transmitted knowledge, the rational knowledge was to be looked down upon as an inferior branch of knowledge and hence all those involved in scientific discoveries were made to carry with them an onus of guilt. Considering the 'transmitted knowledge' (also read *Uloom Sharei*) as the sum total of knowledge placed the ulema at the helm of affairs, nonetheless, it virtually resulted in the closing of the Muslim mind.

The delusion that Muslims have been living under for quite a long time about the nature of knowledge and that has created havoc in the Muslim mind was until very recently a popular notion among the Jews. For almost two thousand years, long before the sack of the second temple in Jerusalem, the Jewish Rabbis have been preaching that the main purpose of life on this planet is to devote to the Torah studies. Even a trade or a commercial activity is allowed only on the pretext that the money thus earned will be spent on those engaged in religious studies. As for reading a secular book, the Jewish Rabbis considered it a blatant violation of faith. For almost two thousand years the Jewish nation in Diaspora lived under this delusion. However, in the 18th century Eastern Europe, a revolutionary, ground breaking question was put forward by an inquisitive Jew. There

are some moments in human living, thus asked the questioner, when it is simply not possible to recite from the Torah or read a religious book, especially when we are in the toilet. Can such odd moments be utilised to read secular literature? The enquirer was trying to find a way out and he got the Rabbi's approval. This was a ground-breaking *responsa*. Soon we find many European Jews complaining of constipation, spending long hours in toilets. In the Jewish quarters where religious elders set the norms of living, toilets became the only safe haven where one could lay hands on books of science and philosophy. And once the taboo was broken it was no longer possible to control the Jewish imagination. In the 19th and 20th centuries we witness a flood of social thinkers, philosophers, scientists and men of letters from among the Jewish nation. In fact, the 20th century owes some of the best Jewish minds for its intellectual build.

The Jewish nation is not a recent phenomenon. They have lived on this planet for centuries. As long as they lived in isolation believing that they can excel in hair-splitting *fiqhi* debates alone, the world did not hear of them. It was not that during the last two thousand years great minds were not born among them. The best among them wasted their energy in debating such 'religious issues' whether it is lawful to flush the toilet on Shabbat or if wearing a wig of natural hair constitutes a breach of faith. But once they had the opportunity to lay their hands on secular knowledge, the same nation produced wonders. The Jewish experience, it so appears, mirrors our own predicament.

Muslim intellectuals in the past were partially aware of the intellectual crises fomented by our delusion about and division of knowledge. Abu Hamid Ghazali, the famous *hujjatul-Islam*, in his monumental work *Ahiya al Uloom* encouraged Muslims to learn Engineering and Medicine so as not to be dependent on non-Muslims. But the idea that true knowledge is holistic, a composite whole of scientific and revelatory knowledge, is yet to gain

ground among Muslims. It calls for no half-hearted efforts or patch-up work, rather it demands nothing less than a paradigm shift.



In the whole universe, there is hardly anyone who is calling humanity towards One God. From every minaret of the mosques and every pulpit of the Islamic seminaries, the invitation is being sent out to people to join a particular sect. The Muslim seminaries operating in different parts of the world in the name of religion choose to preach the exclusivist and sectarian view they adhere to. As a matter fact, instead of worshipping Allah the Almighty, they can be said to have engaged themselves in a kind of cult worship.

## Is there any way out of this Polytheism?

**T**he Muslims are, on the whole, under the grip of polytheism (*shirk*) and the evils emanating from it. The basic reason for their fall from the august position of the leadership of the world is that they have left the path of pure *tawhid*. The punishments that are sent to the chosen communities for taking to polytheism and the way they lose their hold on life can be seen starkly in the case of Muslims throughout the world.

In post-9/11 scenario, the thinking Muslims have been restive and asking themselves, in so many ways, if God has really abandoned them. After all, what can be the underlying reason that the blood of Muslims has become so cheap in the current world and their self-esteem has touched a new low? After the horrifying events in Afghanistan and Iraq, this question has acquired a special urgency. We feel compelled to ask ourselves as to why God has withdrawn his blessings and favours from the adherents of the final Divine Revelation? This question still awaits a satisfactory answer.

The fact is - like the Israelites we Muslims, too, despite our fall from grace, delude ourselves into thinking that we are still holding the seat of the community most favoured by Allah, even

though it is only too evident that in the current dispensation of things we are not among those who are the arbiters of the right and the wrong in the world. The pity is that as all our misguidance emanates from our fake religiosity, it is difficult not only for the common people but even for the cognoscenti to recognize the truth and work for its redress. It is often claimed that the community, as a whole, abide by the Faith, or at least there are many activities that are going on within the community in the name of the Faith, but if one looks at it with the eyes of a hard realist one realizes that all this is only a huge delusion, nothing else.

*Tawhid* connects the humanity whereas shirk divides it into small fragments. The system of thought favoured by the concept of *tawhid* projects one God and the entire humanity as a single entity. Conversely, shirk-tainted minds delight in finding all kinds of pretexts to divide human beings into a thousand compartments. The same message of *tawhid* had been sent to the followers of the earlier Prophets, but they had divided themselves into small factions through all kinds of subjective interpretation of the divine message. The Qur'an states that the advent of Prophet Muhammad witnessed the end of such sectarianism and an over all revival of a *tawhidi* society:

﴿ فَأَلَّفَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِكُمْ ﴾ (آل عمران: 103)

*Shirk* has this peculiar capacity to enter into the minds of the people of the Faith by means of the Faith itself. It is not something new in human history. The worship of the sun, the moon and trees is such a stark evidence of shirk that it can be understood even by the most common intellect. However, practicing sectarianism in the name of religion or projecting a particular interpretation of the faith as the Faith itself and then paying obeisance to it is an act whose implications are not evident to all and sundry. If one looks at the Muslim community as a

whole one wonders as to why the community is at war with itself. If in some cases this confrontation is based on language, in other cases words and edicts are used as ammunition to conduct this battle. The Muslims of one sectarian persuasion have no qualms in killing fellow Muslims of another persuasion even while they are offering prayers inside the mosque. The Muslim seminaries operating in different parts of the world in the name of religion choose to preach the exclusivist and sectarian view they adhere to. They may cite divine commandments and the sayings of the Prophet, but their real objective is to prove that their faction is correct and true and that all others are wrong. This is not a phenomenon peculiar to India, but can be seen anywhere in the world, not excepting the Muslim societies of Europe and America where sectarianism can be seen to operate with no lesser virulence. As a matter fact, instead of worshipping Allah the Almighty, they can be said to have engaged themselves in a kind of cult worship. To them, their faction or sect would seem to have substituted Allah, and they regard the explanation and interpretation of religion by their leaders to be as true as if it were from the Prophet himself. Referring to such a situation the Qur'an says:

﴿إِنَّ الَّذِينَ فَرَّقُوا دِينَهُمْ وَكَانُوا شِيعًا لَسْتَ مِنْهُمْ فِي شَيْءٍ﴾ (الأنعام: 159)

i.e., O Muhammad, those who created sectarianism in the Faith and divided themselves into factions, have nothing to do with you. (Qur'an: 6:159)

Our adherence to Faith in the current times has been tainted by sectarianism of all kinds, our religious seminaries, divided among themselves, are engaged in propagating factional views, and our community as a whole is divided on the basis of different schools of thought like the Hanafi school or the Shafei school etc. It does not take long for one to realize that, raven by divisive tendency, the community is no longer connected to the sacred thread *حبل* that connects it with Allah. In the whole universe, there is

hardly anyone who is calling humanity towards One God. From every minaret of the mosques and every pulpit of the *madrasah*, the invitation is being sent out to people to join a particular sect because that sect embodies the true Faith. The people sending out such invitations have no idea that they are spreading the worst kind of sectarianism in the name of Islam. What, after all, is the reason that, despite the presence of the Qur'an, all the different sects or schools of Muslims believe that it is essential to follow the books written by their leaders to continue their religious mission? In the presence of the Qur'an, is it still necessary that one should seek endorsement from the books written by the commentators, the jurists or other scholars? We have been told in unambiguous words – 'Don't be among those who create schism'

﴿وَلَا تَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ تَفَرَّقُوا﴾ (آل عمران: 105)

In other words, the Qur'an is exhorting Muslims not to be like those who, despite clear instructions to the contrary, have fallen victims to sectarianism and factionalism, because that would call for severe punishment.

The traumatic crisis that the Muslim community is going through today is the inevitable result of internal dissensions and disagreements. Whenever the followers of the divine message sanctified groupism on the pretext of interpretation of the Faith, they got involved in cult worship. The Qur'an states that all the Prophet had been sent with the same Faith and they were exhorted to remain steadfast to it and not to create schism in it

﴿أَنْ أَقِيمُوا الدِّينَ وَلَا تَتَفَرَّقُوا فِيهِ﴾ (الشورى: 13)

The people to whom the Prophet Muhammad was sent also included the followers of Abraham, Moses and Jesus Christ. There was no dearth of rituals among them which they observed religiously. However, they had been engaged in sectarian activities in the name of religion. These people of the earlier Faiths went so far as to declare that those who wanted to keep their place safe in

people should follow them and that was enough. They asked people just to be Israelites or Christians. *وقالوا كونوا همدًا أو نصارى*. These people who, in all sincerity, regarded themselves as the Muslims of the time were engaged in a battle of attrition among themselves. The Israelites would claim exclusive access to Truth and vilify the Christians while the Christians would do the same to the Israelites. The Qur'an declared such sectarianism to be against the Faith. To the followers of the earlier prophets, engaged in this battle of attrition and facing its scourge, Prophet Muhammad gave this propitious message that it did not serve their purpose to be the followers of either Jehovah or Jesus, but that they should be the followers of Allah *كونوا ربانيين* and to take on His law:

﴿ وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ مِنْ اللَّهِ مَنَّاً ﴾ (النحل: 174)

The initial chapters of the Qur'an, in different ways, exhorted the Muslims of the time (the Jews and the Christians), i.e. the followers of the earlier prophets to come out of the stranglehold of sectarianism:

﴿ مَا كَانَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ يَهُودِيًّا وَلَا نَصْرَانِيًّا وَلَكِنْ كَانَ حَنِيفًا مُسْتَقِيمًا ﴾

The invitation to *tawhid* by the Prophet Muhammad impressed upon the Muslims of the time that the adherents of pure *tawhid* can never involve themselves in sectarianism, even if this tendency emanated from any prophet. What God wanted was not to make people Israelites or Christians but to make them truly Godly.

How can the Book that does not allow sectarianism, even if it emanated from a prophet, allow that its followers should form different sects or groups in the name of their leaders? We have turned the Qur'anic invitation to become Godly *كونوا ربانيين* on its head and must ask ourselves how the followers of Prophet Muhammad could accept the division of their community into so many fragments such as Hanafis, Shafis, Shis, Sunnis, Barelvis,

Deobandi, Salafi and so on and so forth? How could it be possible that the people who were known for their fierce loyalty to *taubid* got themselves involved in the worst kind of sectarianism, so much so that it has begun to seem a normal part of their lives? Why can't the different groups of Muslims who are engaged in cult worship, and unfortunately most Muslims are so engaged, see the clear Qur'anic assertion that those who created schisms in the Faith and divided themselves into factions, have no longer anything to do with Prophet Muhammad?

﴿إِنَّ الَّذِينَ فَرَّقُوا دِينَهُمْ وَكَانُوا شِعْبًا لَّسْتَ مِنْهُمْ فِي شَيْءٍ﴾ (آل عمران: 159)

When nations get accustomed to seeing their religious leaders invested with a halo of sacredness, and when common people begin to believe that there are some individuals among them whose thoughts are sacred and pure and do not admit of scrutiny and correction, then freedom of thought is effectively stifled. In critical moments, such communities fail to find new solutions to their problems and ignite their path with the light of the Divine Revelation. And then all the tasks undertaken in the name of religion result in its negation.

## Is Religion all about Rituals?

**T**he Muslim community is going through a deep crisis. The intensity of this crisis can be gauged from the fact that everyone, be he a leader or commoner, is asking the question as to why, despite the presence of the Qur'an amongst us, we cannot see any light at the end of the tunnel. Why the community that was entrusted with the task of leading the world, despite the presence of the Qur'an and the teachings of the scholars and commentators, is going through a deepening ideological crisis? After the trauma of Auschwitz this question had raised its head among the Jews too as to how could God abandon His chosen community to fend for itself? The Jewish scholars and intellectuals asked themselves the question that if the community of Jews was wiped out from the face of earth, then what possible meaning can the history have for them? The Israelites who, for a long time, have been accustomed to live in history are yet to fully recognise the fact that they have been ejected from the seat of authority and guidance. The basic difference between the Israelites and the Muslims is that while the deposition of the former is a divine decision, the deposition of the

latter is an historical aberration that can be corrected through recourse to the Last Revelation. However, the irony of the situation is that instead of critically assessing their situation and attempting to light up their path with the help of the Divine Revelation, the Muslims have become prisoners of history. This has made it difficult for them to come to grips with this historical aberration and understand the full extent of their decline.

The world is now going through its worst crisis in history. Enormous changes, not always for the better, have been effected in different countries of the world in the name of development; the unscrupulous way in which different parochial powers have tried to extend their areas of influence has resulted in an uncertain future for the world community. The spoilage of the environment, the accumulation of the wealth of the world in a few hands, the monopoly of multinational companies, the suppression of the freedom of thought through the manipulation of the media and publicity and compelling the people to see and hear what some dominant power or faction wants people to see and hear - these are some of the realities of our time that are difficult to come to terms with. The anti-God stance of the policy makers has turned the world into an atomic furnace. The intellectual and economic resources of humanity are being used for the destruction of human life rather than preserving it. Under the circumstances, it was expected that the inheritors of the last Divine Revelation would come forward to direct the confused humanity. However, the stark fact is that despite being declared the most favoured community by God, the Muslims are engaged in a struggle for their existence. There is no doubt that the current situation prevailing in the world urgently demands guidance from God-fearing people. If the Muslims, like the other communities, do not show courage to face this challenge, then how can they mark their distinction from other communities as the inheritors of the last Divine Revelation?

Lately, on the occasion of the Parliament of World's Religions, I had the opportunity to travel to Spain and stay on the peak of mount Montserrat in a Christian monastery. Some Sikh religious leaders and a pundit from Manipur were also staying in the same monastery. I saw that the pundit who had got up at the break of dawn engaged in adorning, with utmost care and concentration, his forehead down to his nose with a white pigment, till the time it became apparently visible from his human face that he was indeed a religious leader! On the other side, an old Sikh gentleman was busy arranging a length of cloth, considerably long, with the help of a friend so that he could participate in the World Parliament of Religions like a true Sikh wearing his prominent turban. An extensive array of colourful religious dresses was on display there. The black robes of the Benedictian monks, the *Kippah* of the Jews, the white *sarees* of the Brahmakumaris and the Arabian robes and *tarboosh* of some Muslim divines. Some had added the honorific 'His Holiness' before their names, while others insisted on prefixing their names with 'Reverend' or 'Father'. If some were rabbis, others were Maulanas, and some even considered it reasonable to write the word 'Imam' very carefully before their names.

In this assembly of the divines, such insistence on sartorial refinement and its display left one greatly disappointed. I asked the pundit sitting by me the reason for this insistence on the part of the divines on wearing the particular dress of their community in the World Parliament of Religions, as it would accentuate perception of difference among religions. After a lot of argument and debate on the issue, he finally came out with the frank answer: 'People look up to us for direction and guidance. They want to see us as role models, different from the man on the street. It is obvious that all this attention to dress is because of the image that the common people have of us in their minds. Otherwise, what does dress have to do with real piety?' In the

perpetuation of this ritual of dress, the pundit alone could not be held responsible. All the leaders had taken great pains in wearing dresses that would distinguish them from common men and project their image of being Godly or religious beyond all doubt, at the very first sight. The common people would find it difficult to decide whether a human being like them, of flesh and blood, is breathing behind the heavy and impeccable robes, and whether his views can be subjected to scrutiny and analysis.

It is said that when the Roman officials had come to arrest Jesus Christ, it was difficult for them to recognise him as he was sitting with his followers. They had to take the cue from Judas' reverential kiss. Jesus Christ was, after all, a distinguished Prophet. Even the followers of Prophet Muhammad did not like to adopt any artificial means of distinction that would set them apart from the common populace. The visitors to Medina would often express their amazement at the spectacle of Caliph Omar interacting with them wearing an ordinary dress, without any visible trappings of power and the presence of a flattering entourage. The first generation of Muslims greatly valued freedom of thought. They knew very well that everyone is equal before God. The responsibility of leadership or offering guidance to others does not take the leaders beyond the level of common human beings to a holy status. The common Muslims should be assured that they are entitled to put the actions and words of their leaders and scholars under the strictest scrutiny. So much so that even during the course of his Friday sermon a common Bedouin woman dared to disagree with the Caliph of the time. Conversely, leaders and scholars also considered themselves to be ordinary men of flesh and blood and would not like any supra-human epithet or title for themselves. The ordinary Muslims also did not like the idea that they should see people like themselves to be invested with a sacred halo around them. As long as Muslims valued freedom of thought they sought guidance from the pages

of the Divine Revelation, and not from their leaders and scholars. The moment scholars and men of letters established the convention of presenting themselves as sacred entities, quite apart from ordinary human beings, and pompous and pretentious spiritual epithets began to be prefixed or suffixed to their names, the Muslim mind began to stagnate and take recourse to blind imitation.

If today, despite the existence of the Qur'an, we cannot see any light at the end of the tunnel, it is due to the fact that we accord greater credibility and honour to *ulema* and *fugaha* than to the Divine Revelation. Instead of directly accessing the Qur'an and ignite our thinking from it, we consider it necessary to verify whether our stance is corroborated by the sayings of the earlier Islamic scholars. Those who should have been students of the Qur'an have, through different rituals and by adopting impressive titles, transformed themselves into the religious authority. As a consequence, a priestly class among the Muslims has emerged. What could be the reason for this amazing similarity between the religious leaders of the Israelites and those of our own community? Just as the religious leaders of the Israelites called themselves rabbis, implying that they share Godly attributes, and the Christian priests adopted for themselves the term 'Father' which is appropriate only for God Himself, in the same way, the Muslim religious leaders have adopted the title 'Maulana', a term that has been used in the Qur'an for Allah the Almighty. When communities get accustomed to seeing their religious leaders invested with a halo of sacredness, and when common people begin to believe that there are some individuals among them whose thoughts are sacred and pure and do not admit of scrutiny and correction, then freedom of thought is effectively stifled. In critical moments, such communities fail to find new solutions to their problems and ignite their path with the light of the Divine Revelation. And then all the tasks undertaken in the name of

religion result in its negation. Christ's strongest admonition of the Pharisees, the Jewish Maulanas of Christ's time, in the Bible endorses this view. The Qur'anic assertion in the context of the Prophet extending *da'wa* to people that he offered people relief from the tyranny of priesthood was designed to stress the idea that God has not given the monopoly of interpreting religion to a particular class, and that the Prophet's invitation for revolution would not put up with any kind of intervention by rabbis, popes or *Maulanas*. How can true piety and love for God allow that the believers should use epithets and titles exclusive for God, and the assumption of false spiritual authority should extinguish the light of freedom of thought and expression?

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The fundamental difference between the juridical religion and the revealed religion is that while the latter is directed at inundating the heart and mind of human beings with God's devotion, the former remains trapped in hair-splitting and outward demonstration of rituals. The pages of the Qur'an are filled with edifying statements about the fate of the Israelites. If we choose to have our eyes open, then we can easily try to find answer in these statements to the question as to why we were dispossessed of the privileged position that rightfully belonged to us, and why God withdrew His blessings from us.

## Muslims the world over ask in desperation Why God's help has faltered!

**T**he Muslim community, despite its fall from the sovereign position, still considers itself the best of all the communities. Its members still continue to act in a complacent manner in conducting their affairs and indulge in daydreaming. On an emotional plane, the community still finds it difficult to accept the fact that it is no longer the community that has been promised help from the heavens through the angels in all hour of difficulties. The sweet, musical note of verses celebrating the life of the Prophet Muhammad, the vast gatherings celebrating the Prophet's birth anniversary and the massive congregations of collective worship may reassure us that we are indeed the true adherents of the Faith, but the fact remains that we are no longer the community that has been characterized as the chosen people. The crisis has assumed grave proportions. Centuries have passed since we had occupied the sovereign position, and we were designated as the chosen community. As the followers of the final Prophet, we have been blessed with the promise of the leadership of the world, till the last hour. We had come to acquire this

sovereign position through the divine Word revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

As long as the divine Word lit up our ways, we exercised a firm grip on the movements of history. The course of events in the world followed our direction, and sometimes, in moments of difficulties, when we felt our grip slackening, our eyes would automatically look towards the heavens. We sought help from Allah Almighty and sure enough the help would come unfailingly at the most opportune moment. During the battle of Badr, the Prophet himself was leading a handful of warriors against a vast enemy horde, and sought help from Allah. During the later battles in Muslim history, be it the vanquishing of the emperors of Persia or Rome, or still later, the incident of burning the boats on the coast of Spain, the Muslims always felt that a living and dynamic God was always there to help them out. This feeling actuated them to take the gravest of risks in the way of the Faith. When Harmzan, the famous Iranian general, was brought as a captive before Caliph Omar, he had borne witness to this fact. He had said, 'O Omar, as long as it was strength pitted against strength, you were nowhere in the reckoning. But today God is on your side, and who can vanquish one that has God on his side.'

There is no doubt that we are the same people who once vanquished the mightiest of enemies on the strength of our belief in Allah's help. But what has happened, after all, that for centuries now, we have become strangers to this blessing of Allah. There is no dearth of people even today who are ready to die in the name of Allah. In different parts of the world, there are groups known as *Hizbollah*, *Islamic Jihad*, *Jama'a Islamia*, *Mujahideen-e-Islam*, *Sipah-Sahaba* etc., whose members are ready to lay down their lives for Islam. Which part of the world is free from the presence of the followers of Muhammad who have not written the glorious history of Islam with their own blood? However, in all the major and minor conflicts and challenges in

the contemporary world, it seems as though defeat has become our destiny. Allah who is the Almighty and who can change the course of events in the twinkling of an eye does not come to the rescue of the Muslims. Mourning assemblies are held in the Muslim community more frequently than in any other community, one can hear cries of despair emanating from every corner of the Muslim society. This is because this community has been at the receiving end of murder and mayhem for centuries, each moment brings some new torment for it, and each day it has to face some new challenges. Who will the people turn to in this moment of grave crisis? The mosques now remain more crowded than before. The reformist and revivalist movements have created an ideal atmosphere suitable for prayers and fasting, nightlong worship, litanies, meditation etc. There is no dearth of people performing supererogatory prayers and reading the scripture. Despite all this, despite the visible restlessness and helplessness of Muslims, why are we deprived of the kind attention of Allah Almighty?

This is a question that agitates both the elite and the commoners amongst us. Even the best men of intellect among us seem to be thoroughly confused. A couple of years ago, during the attack of the U.S. on Afghanistan when the Afghan people refused to compromise with their self-respect, they had to face the brutality of the American army. The fighter jets B-52 rained down death on the people. Hardly would there be a Muslim in the world who had not sent his tearful prayers to Allah during those weeks. The whole Muslim world – the East and the West, the Shiite and the Sunni – cried out in despair, 'O Allah, kindly rescue this helpless and powerless community.' The mosques reverberated with the chanting of prayers, so much so that even those Muslims who had never visited the mosque earlier, made it a point to go there and pray for Allah's help, along with their brethren. The Afghans showed extraordinary courage. The death raining down from the

sky could not shake their resolve. At that moment, the whole world waited with bated breath for a miracle. The days turned to weeks and still there was no miracle in sight. On the contrary, the defeat of the Afghans became more and more evident. The events in Afghanistan totally shattered the confidence of the entire Muslim nation. The Almighty did not come to their rescue. The whole Ummah plunged into deep despair. After the sack of Baghdad in 1258 C.E., this was the second event in the history of the Muslims that brought them face to face with a deep emotional crisis. It seemed as though no new dawn would ever greet this community again.

As a community, during the moments of crisis, we always declared that victory would be ours through help from Allah نصر من الله وفتح قريب. We have done everything in our command to face the enemy and change our lot. But we have remained deprived of Allah's help. During the American invasion of Iraq when the American tanks were caught up in the desert storm, it sent a wave of excitement through the Muslim community. It seemed as though Allah's help had finally arrived. But this complacency did not last long. The fall of Baghdad once again underlined the fact that Allah is no longer with us; and as long as a community does not enjoy Allah's pleasure and support, no one can save it from defeat and humiliation. For centuries now, we have been facing defeats on a daily basis. It seems as though every moment something is breaking within us. We cannot but agonise collectively – when will Allah's help arrive, after all?

Our *fuqaha* and *mufasssiroon* do not seem to be interested in analyzing this situation and come up with well-argued answers. Rather, they seem more interested in reassuring us through wrong interpretations of Qur'anic verses. According to them, all these misfortunes are, in fact, meant to test the strength of our beliefs. They understand the Qur'anic verse –